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"Young, Gifted, and Black": Understanding the Complex Experiences of High-Achieving Black Students in AP Classes at a Diverse Suburban High School

Jody Elliott-Schrimmer
DePaul University, jellio19@depaul.edu

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"Young, Gifted, and Black": Understanding the Complex Experiences of High-Achieving

Black Students in AP Classes at a Diverse Suburban High School

A Dissertation in Education
with a Concentration in Curriculum Studies

by

Jody Elliott-Schrimmer

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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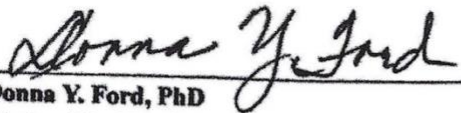
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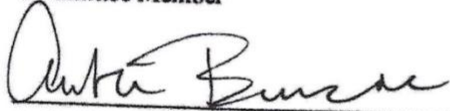
(signature)

Amira Proweller, PhD
Associate Professor
DePaul University
Chair of Committee

June 2023
Date

(signature)

Donna Y. Ford, PhD
Distinguished Professor of Education and Human Ecology
The Ohio State University
Committee Member

June 2023
Date

(signature)

Anita Thawani Bucio, PhD
Adjunct Professor
DePaul University
Committee Member

June 2023
Date

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 to program guidelines, as directed.

Author Signature _J. Elliott-Schin_

Date _April 26, 2023_

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the social and academic experiences of Black students in AP English classes at a diverse suburban high school. This study aimed to illuminate their experiences, while giving voice to this traditionally marginalized group. Students provided recommendations for increasing academic success and belonging for future students as schools continually work toward gender and racial equity in the AP classroom.

In this Critical Race Theory (CRT) oriented study, I sought to understand the essence of the Black experience in predominantly White academic spaces through a phenomenological methodology. I analyzed the significant moments and statements that the participants shared about their experiences with the curriculum, grading, and social interactions in the classroom. The presence and absence of belonging are fundamentally related to the students' racial identity and to students' academic success. The participants revealed the hardships that they endured like invisibility, isolation, silence, and fear, while sharing how those experiences impacted their academics and social-emotional well-being. They also revealed the moments of social-emotional connection and joy that they felt with their teachers and peers.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, who gave everything that they had to ensure that I had the educational opportunities that they did not have. Thank you for teaching me the importance of education at an early age and for continuing to support my dreams throughout my adulthood. You put your retirement on hold to help me complete this degree while working a full-time job. While I can never repay you for the years that you have nurtured our family, I can dedicate this work to you because without you it would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my husband, Jeff, for being unequivocally supportive during this tedious process. I have worked on my dissertation on every trip that we have taken over the last two years and you never complained – not even once. You comforted me through the setbacks and celebrated each small accomplishment leading to this day. You are truly a partner in every sense of the word, and I am so grateful that I get to share my life with you.

To my children, Charlotte, Maxwell, and Penelope thank you for understanding my commitment to this project and for giving me love and grace when I needed it the most. When I think of equity in education, I think of the world that I want for you. Thank you for inspiring me to continue researching this topic. I thought of you with every word that typed – I even used your names as pseudonyms as a constant reminder of my "why." I hope that one day you can read this paper and know that I will always fight to make this a better world for you. Without my family's understanding, love, and support, I would not have finished this dissertation. Thank you and I love you.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. Amira Proweller, for her encouragement and faith in me. Your enthusiasm for my work stirred a hidden passion in me for writing that I never knew existed. Thank you for being an incredible mentor and guide throughout this process. You are a real example of how building a trusting student-teacher relationship can inspire academic excellence in a student and heal old wounds of self-doubt. Thank you for believing in me.

I am also extraordinarily grateful to the other two members of my committee, Dr. Anita Bucio and Dr. Donna Y. Ford. Despite being incredibly busy making incredible contributions to the field of education, you took the time to support my research and I am so grateful. Your expertise in these topics strengthened my knowledge and understanding. Your feedback and insights were critical to my development throughout this process, and I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with you.

Chapter I: Introduction

In DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (need first publication date, not just the new one), he espouses the importance of educating the "talented tenth" to uplift the Black race through intellectual and leadership development. While his focus on high-achieving individuals was centered on inspiring African Americans to achieve equality through intellectualism versus skilled labor, the goals are the same in the recruitment and retention of Black students in advanced classes: increasing one's access and opportunities for success. Northwestern University scholar, Martin D. Jenkins (1936), noted that there was limited research on the population of Black students with "superior intellect"; therefore, he studied the number of "superior students," the age of identification, their behavior, and their racial classification and their achievement (p. 175). Although Black thought leaders discussed multiple interpretations of "Blackness," this question of how one's Black identity impacts academic success shifted because of the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954.

Brown v. Board of Education ruled that the idea of having schools separate, but unequal was unconstitutional. This ruling forced integration in schools, which on the surface was great for American society; however, this ruling provided adverse outcomes for the Black community. For example, bell hooks (1994) recounts her transition from attending a Black school to being bussed to a White school after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling. hooks argues that attending a White school, "taught me the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination" (p.4). Black students in White spaces lose their racial identity and are subjected to negative messages of White supremacy and Black inferiority (Woodson, 1933/1996). To maintain predominantly White spaces in integrated schools, thus upholding White supremacy, schools have created systems in

which advanced classes are almost exclusively White spaces, and Black students are denied access to those programs because of their racial identity. After Brown v. Board of Education, the American educational system moved from de facto segregation to de jure segregation. While there were no explicit rules mandating segregation, the hegemonic structures in place created an environment in which White supremacy was the norm. According to the most recent Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) data, 8.9% of public students enrolled in gifted education are Black compared to 58% of White students. Discrimination, prejudice, and social inequalities, contribute to segregation in AP Classes and other advanced educational programs.

In addition to placement in AP classes, we are living in a time when educators and their curricula are under intense scrutiny due to political divisions in the United States. In places like The University of Virginia, those who oppose diversity, equity and inclusion efforts are rewarded. After publicly objecting to the university's efforts to be more inclusive, UVA alumni, Bert Ellis, was appointed to the university's board of trustees by Governor Younkin (Saul, 2023). Although the researchers cited throughout this study would argue that students thrive when teachers use an inclusive curriculum, a small but powerful politically charged movement against discussing inclusivity has stifled progress in this area. Having conversations about race in the classroom or teaching a full account of American history is more difficult than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic (Walker, 2023). The National Education Association (NEA) attributes this "manufactured outrage" to a desire to create conflict for political gain (Walker, 2023). "The highly charged environment has also led to marked decline in support for teaching about race, racism, and racial and ethnic diversity" (Walker, 2023). During this post-pandemic era when students are relearning social skills, students, their families and communities are increasingly

demonstrating an inability to engage in political discourse focused on history and identity. Rogers and Kahne (2022) report,

> In many schools, parents or community members have sought to limit or challenge: Teaching about issues of race and racism (50%); Policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ student rights (48%); Student access to books in the school library (33%); or Social Emotional Learning (39%).

Students' academic experiences are shaped by the curriculum in general education classes and in AP classes. Regardless of the level, students need access to culturally responsive curriculum and anti-racist; however, such inclusive curricula could be more difficult to access due to this increase in polarization.

Research Problem Statement

The few Black students who earn access to advanced classes experience academic and social struggles unlike those of their general education or unidentified gifted peers. School ability grouping (and to a greater extent) tracking also create vastly different schooling and learning opportunities that lead to different academic trajectories. The lower grouping of Black students (unidentified gifted students) compromises their academic and racial identity. School districts have struggled with the inequitable implementation of advanced learning courses for students; however, due to issues such as implicit bias in teacher recommendations, students of color are disproportionally excluded from advanced learning opportunities. In addition to teachers' implicit bias, White parents' opportunity hoarding also contributes to the racial predictability within gifted programs in schools. McMillian Cottom (2019) best describes opportunity hoarding as when,

They [White parents] want all the children in their child's school to thrive, but they want

their child to thrive just a bit more than most. To help their child thrive, these parents use

their proximity to local and civic leaders to lobby their personal preferences as politically

expedient positions. They gently but insistently marshal resources like teacher time,

curriculum access, and extracurricular participation for their children. They donate. They

volunteer. They call. They email. They make this already well-funded public school work

like a private school for their child: individualized attention, personalized resources, and

cumulative advantage. The opportunities these parents hoard become zero-sum for

parents who cannot do the same (p. 105).

BIPOC families do not have the economic or racial privilege to wield this kind of power

within schools and their kids suffer because of this disparity. School systems pursue half-hearted

attempts at reform to no avail. In New York City, "70% of the roughly 1 million public school

students in New York are Black and Latino, about 75% of the roughly 16,000 students in gifted

elementary school classes are White or Asian" (Shapiro, 2021 p.1). As a result of these inequities

that are steeped in racism and segregation, (former) Mayor DeBlasio's suggested "reform" was

actually a plan to phase out the current gifted program. While his goal was to make accelerated

learning available to a wider range of students, there is something inherently flawed with a

system that is so broken that the only way to fix it is by canceling the program.

To get rid of all gifted programs is to further the notion that gifted classes are for White

students, and removing the program is a better option than allowing Black and Brown students to

enter the classes. Yes, racist systems should be dismantled, but Black and Brown students

deserve to have their scholarly identity affirmed through equitable advanced programs instead of

relying on differentiated instruction. Ford and Wright (2021) argue that "the notion of

deconstructing without reconstructing anew (uprooting the racist and exclusionary system of GATE) is not just an act of irresponsibility, but 'smoke and mirrors' that maintain the status quo denying another generation of children whom educators have been entrusted to nurture and protect" (p. 4). Instead of jettisoning gifted education, we need culturally responsive education in advanced learning programs. DeBlasio's plan seems to deny the existence of Black gifted children in the NYC school system and their need academic and social needs (Ford & Wright, 2021). Current resistance to inclusionary and anti-racist practices is rooted in fear of uprooting the fear of disrupting the ever-present systems of oppression.

While AP is not synonymous with gifted education, it often functions in place of gifted education in secondary schools. If one is to assume that AP English Language and Literature classes are truly more rigorous than the other courses and are more likely to prepare students for college-level literacy skills, then it is imperative that Black students gain equal access to these courses to participate in and transform the oppressive mainstream culture from within (Delpit, 2006). Strong literacy skills pervade all other content areas, and they provide students with the opportunity to participate in social justice advocacy in ways that they could not without the ability to understand and analyze the language of dominance and hegemony. Danielle Allen (2016) argues that "those with more sophisticated verbal skills are clearly more ready to be civic and political participators" (p. 46). These students with heightened verbal skills have acute interpretive and expressive skills; they can recognize problems and patterns, then articulate their opinions on how to proceed. Allen (2016) contends that linguistic sensitivity connects to "foundational civic competency" (p. 46). Acute literacy skills can provide Black AP students with the skills to advocate for themselves and others, participate in civic conversations, and live meaningful participatory lives.

If this is the case, then Black students need to be integrated into AP English classes, and schools must adopt anti-racist and culturally responsive curricula into the classroom. The lessons and assessments should represent the "mirrors" and "windows" in students' lives (Sims, 1990). The AP curriculum should reflect the students' experiences while providing windows into others' experiences. Pertaining to Black students, the curriculum needs to reflect the oppression and joy that are synonymous with the Black experience in America.

Research Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the social and academic experiences of Black students in AP English classes at a diverse suburban high school. This study aimed to illuminate their experiences, whether positive or negative, while giving voice to this traditionally marginalized group. Students also provided recommendations for how to increase academic success and belonging for future students as schools continually work toward gender and racial equity in the AP classroom.

Research Questions

The main research question on which the dissertation study was as follows: How do Black students in a diverse suburban school describe their educational experiences in AP English classes? In addition to the main research question, I also had two sub questions: How do Black AP English students describe their sense of academic success? How do Black AP English students describe their sense of belonging in this unique, seemingly diverse context?

Overview of Research Design

According to College Board data from 2011, Black/African American students are the most underrepresented students in the Advanced Placement program with just 9% of the 14.5% of all Black students taking Advanced Placement courses. This is compared to their White

counterparts of whom 57.1% of 59.2% took AP exams (AP Data and Research, 2018). In

Illinois, 16% of students who graduated in 2011 were Black/African American; yet, only 4.1%

earned a score of a three, four, or five on their AP exam designating them as "successful test-

takers" (AP Data and Research, 2018). Using the percent of Black students graduating in any

given year divided by the percent of successful AP exam takers in that graduating class,

researchers can calculate the percent of equity and excellence achieved for that

state. Unfortunately for Illinois, the percent of "equity and excellence" achieved for

Black/African Americans in 2011 was 26.9% as compared to Latinx students in Illinois whose

excellence scores were 86.8% (AP Data and Research, 2018). Of all the AP courses offered, AP

Literature and Composition is the most popular one for Black/African American students.

   Over the last four decades, scholars have written about the connection between the

academic underachievement of Black/African American students and culturally irrelevant

curricula, poverty, single-parent households, and the non-academic tracking that these students

face in high schools. Although this scholarship is rich, it places undue emphasis on Black

students' underachievement as opposed to the factors that impact Black student

achievement. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the factors associated

with Black students' success in a suburban high school's Advanced Placement Literature and

Composition class. This study will help teachers and parents to understand the conditions in

which students of color thrive in a high-stakes testing atmosphere.

Rationale and Significance

   As various researchers have established, human beings have the power to construct

meaning; however, there are some limitations within that freedom. Some of the most relevant

experiences which dictate a person's worldview are their race, gender, and socioeconomic status;

knowing that there are those limitations inspires me to want to change the educational structures in place. I strongly believe that race is an underlying factor in much of what people experience on a day-to-day basis, meaning, I see the world through a critical race theory lens. According to Zamudio et al., (2011), racialization is a long-standing historical issue, and one of the best ways to improve conditions for people of color is to create a space for oppositional voices to the dominant oppressive discourse. As I defined a process for increasing students' success in the AP classroom, the study was situated within a critical race theory lens, acknowledging the hegemony inherent in the structures of the AP course. With a high-stakes test at the end of the course, being hyper-aware of the meritocracy involved in AP testing is essential to being able to create student success in spite of the limitations set by having high-stakes testing at the end of the course (Bridgeman et al., 2011). According to the US Department of Education, "Black and Latino students make up 37% of students in high schools, 27% of students enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course, and 18% of students receiving a qualifying score of 3 or above on an AP exam" (DoE study, 2014). This means that there is a very small percentage of students who can take an AP class, and when they do take one, they are significantly less likely to receive a passing score. As colleges move away from using standardize test scores for admissions, admissions representatives will need to rely on other measures of student success like evidence of rigorous coursework on students' transcripts, like taking AP classes (Harberson, 2021).

Researcher Identity and Positionality Statement

My interest in high achieving Black students began before I had the vocabulary to describe my desire to understand the intersections of race and education. Growing up as the child of two Jamaican immigrant parents, they inculcated me with an extraordinary sense of culture

and values. I also learned that Black people in America are subjected to specific inexorable systems of power that jettisoned any hope of "liberty and justice for all." These systems of inequality are grounded in hegemony and White supremacy. My parents taught me the old adage - education is the great equalizer, but in my schooling experience, I was met with one of the most unequal circumstances – tracking. Isabel Wilkerson likens American racism to a hidden caste system (Wilkerson, 2020). Perhaps the tracking system in schools is the education system's version of a caste system – a rigid ranking system founded in hate, oppression, and resource hoarding. Notably, Wilkerson details narratives of racial injustice but ends on a note of optimism. The last words of her book are "the light of day." I hope to do the same – I hope that my research illuminated Black students experience as they are uniquely situated in AP English classes. The research should also acknowledge the inherent oppression while celebrating the successes of these high-achieving Black individuals. When teaching Black children, the students must know that educators see them, hear them, and understand them. To make these changes, equity advocates must urge schools to provide Black students with human, culturally responsive, and anti-deficit schooling (Wright et al., 2022, p. xiv).

The moment that sparked my interest in high-achieving Black students was when I was eight years old, and I moved homes and, consequently, switched schools. I was in the gifted program in my predominantly Black school, but when I moved to my mostly White elementary school, the district told my parents that being gifted in that school had no bearing on placement in the new school. For my remaining two years in that school, I fought to earn a spot in their gifted program, but that is when I learned the second lesson from my parents. As a Black person in America, one must work twice as hard to get half as far. As Bettina Love (2019) argues, "Schools are mirrors of our society; educational justice cannot and will not happen in a vacuum

or with pedagogies that undergird the educational survival complex." (p. 40). I was never accepted into their program even though I met and exceeded their testing requirements. I kept fighting throughout my K-12 education, but many of my Black peers succumbed to a lack of care and cultivation for Black students in our schools.

As a Black feminist educator, I have dedicated my career and research to fostering an inclusive and uplifting classroom culture to disrupt the systems in place that were created to ensure our failure. Most Black students who have the ability to take more rigorous coursework do not because they have been told in a plethora of ways that those courses are not for them. Historically, Black students are tracked into lower (less rigorous) courses while their White peers are in the higher-level or gifted classes. People find data to show that there is an achievement gap, but what about the fact that 50% of White students are in gifted classes compared to 8% of Black students? They are not even learning the same information. How can schools expect Black students to achieve at the same level as their White peers while they are not maintaining equal expectations?

I conducted this research as a parent of Black students who may encounter some of the very same barriers or opportunities that the participants reveal in their interviews and journal entries. I have been in meetings with my kids' school leaders implying them to treat my children with the same dignity as the other students. I have lead professional development and equity workshops for my community and the educators within in to fill in the critical gaps that exist from inadequate and inequitable education. I am also a school board member in my kids' high school district which has given me the privilege to be amongst the decision-makers in our district as we all strive to make the school a more equitable place for all students. I serve on the equity

committee and have the joy of working with their director of equity as she builds a robust equity

program across two school buildings with very different demographics.

As a curriculum studies doctoral student, one of the main topics I have researched for

each class is race and education in the English classroom. I sought to understand the history of

racism in the United States and how that has affected the educational system. Once I understood

these issues in history, I became interested in how racism and hegemony impact students'

experiences in different spaces. I chose the AP classroom because as an AP Literature teacher in

a very diverse suburban school, I am surprised and disheartened by the lack of diversity in my

classes. The school has tried to remove many of the barriers to taking AP classes, such as teacher

recommendations, GPA, or testing; however, my classes still only have one or two Black

students in them. I was interested in uncovering why the Black students who have chosen to take

the course have made that choice. I sought to understand the essence of their experience as a

singular Black student in a White space in a school that has 50% students of color. I interviewed

the students to give voice to their perceptions of the problems and opportunities for teachers to

make the AP English space more welcoming. I explored their experiences with the curriculum,

grading, and their sense of belonging in the class.

The idea of belonging is acutely important to my research because I think empathy and

belonging are foundational to the teacher-student relationship and to student success. Bettina

Love describes the importance of belonging when she writes,

> Described by bell hooks, 'homeplace' is a space where Black folx
>
> truly matter to each other, where souls are nurtured, comforted,
>
> and fed. Homeplace is a community, typically led by women,

where White power and the damages done by it are healed by

loving Blackness and restoring dignity. (Love, 2019, p.63)

Lewis et al. (2016) explain belonging in education as "the extent to which individuals feel like a valued, accepted, and legitimate member in their academic domain." The researchers continue describing belonging as "an innate human need" and it is critical to one's psychological and physical well-being (Lewis, et al., 2016). A student who feels a sense of belonging feels valued and cared for in their learning environment. Walton and Cohen (2011) found that Black students who experience belonging and who have social interventions to combat negative feelings were more likely to achieve academic success than their Black peers in the control group or their Black peers who did not participate in the study.

A goal of this research was to reveal if the participants felt like their AP English class was (or could become) a homeplace for Black students.

Researcher Assumptions

As I conducted my research, I kept my own biases in mind. Although I am a minority in the United States, I am from a country where my people are the majority, i.e., Jamaica. This distinction of being a part of the Black diaspora allows me to have a slightly different perspective than multigenerational African-Americans. As an educator, I also put a disproportionate amount of importance on the value of education, as evidenced by my multiple academic degrees, which do not equate to economic prosperity.

Lately, I live and work in an affluent suburb; therefore, my family's privileged socio-economic status also informs my worldview. However, as a Black female who occupies many predominantly White spaces, I experience limited privilege and access in our society.

Key Terminology

In the literature, researchers use the terms Black and African-American interchangeably, which does not account for the experiences that Black students from the diaspora experience in terms of identity and culture. For this literature review, I will continue to use the terms synonymously to maintain consistency with the literature. For the purposes of this literature review, "Black" includes students with at least one Black grandparent who might have physical features defined by facial features and skin tone that our society (problematically) places within racial confines of "Blackness." These groups of students vary in ethnicity and can include, but are not limited to, students from the United States, the Caribbean, and countries in Africa. "Underrepresentation" is also used to note the lack of diversity in advanced classes. When it is relevant to the nature of the study, the researchers define the term. Still, not all researchers specifically define the term with percentages of students excluded from the programs. The term "gifted" varies from one study to another. As the meaning changes, I have noted it in the literature review; however, the definition ranges from admittance into a selective enrollment class based on parent and teacher recommendations to a more quantitative approach - earning a set score on a standardized test. Researchers seem to use the word "gifted" as synonymous with high achieving, honors, or selective enrollment classes (Elhoweris et al., 2005; Henfield et al. 2008). The National Association of Gifted Children (2022) defines giftedness as "Students with gifts and talents perform - or have the capability to perform - at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential." (NAGC.org).

They are careful to note that gifted students come from a variety of racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, which is an important distinction. The Federal definition from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [Title IX, Part A, Definition 22.] is as follows: "Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities" (nagc.org). Since the population in my study will not be held to a technical (quantifiable) measure of giftedness, for the purposes of my literature review and of my study, I will use the terms gifted and high achieving interchangeably to include all students who choose to enroll in AP courses at my research sight. When I use the terms "gifted" or "high-achieving" I will be conjuring the inclusivity of the definition from the National Association of Gifted Children and the federal government.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is comprised of seven chapters. In the next chapter, chapter two, I review the existing scholarship related to gifted education, ability grouping, belonging, culturally responsive education, and identity development. In chapter three, I explain the specific methodology that I used for my research study including a detailed explanation of the research site and other contextual information. I divided my finding chapter into two separate chapters; the first finding chapter addresses the first research sub question, focusing on Black students' experiences and academic success. The second findings chapter, chapter five, addresses the second research sub question in which I explore Black students' experiences and their sense of belonging in the AP English classroom. Chapter six, the discussion chapter, explores how I

interpreted the findings in chapters four and five. I close the dissertation with chapter seven, a

synthesis of the main ideas from the dissertation, recommendations, and my personal reflection.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This section is organized into five sections. First, I begin the literature review with a section outlining the history of gifted education, specifically Advanced Placement courses through the College Board. I focus on this specific group as opposed to IB or honors classes because my dissertation is focused on students in Advanced Placement classes. I will explore studies that reveal how students are admitted to advanced classes and how their acceptance relates to their racial identity. While there is a plethora of research in the area of identity, for the purposes of this literature, the scope is narrowed to Black identity and high achieving K-12 students and White identity related to teachers given that my participants are Black and their teachers are White. After an exploration of that topic, the literature review will present the information related to how students are initially accepted into advanced education programs and the barriers that exist.

In this chapter, I will review the literature on the Black student identity and their sense of belonging within and outside of advanced classes. These sections also include literature focused on the emotional and academic outcomes for high-achieving Black students in K-12 classrooms. After I examine the emotional and academic outcomes for students with a Black identity, the literature review shifts to White identity because in the United States, the teacher workforce is predominantly White. I will review the literature on the stages of White identity development to show the connections between the teacher's identity and the student experience. I complete the literature review with a review of culturally responsive education because the teacher's pedagogy and curricular choices can have a prodigious impact on a student's experience in an advanced class. The literature is presented in chronological order to demonstrate how the research has evolved over the last 30 years.

Literature Search Criteria

When conducting the research, I searched various terms that addressed the intersections of the two identities under review: high-achieving and Black. I used Google Scholar and the DePaul Library to explore the following terms: (Black or African American) AND (Gifted or Talent*), (Black or African American) AND (Advanced), (Black or African American) AND (AP), (Black or African American) AND (IB). I also searched (Black or African American) AND (honors) and (Black or African American) AND (high-achieving) to capture the K-8 research that might not use AP or IB.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

All of the literature outlined in this review is primarily situated in Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory, or CRT, was born out of a legal practice in the 1980s called critical legal studies (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998), and extends to areas such as women's studies (Wing, 1997) and education (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT upholds the notion that racism is a part of the fabric of American culture and in applying this theory to legal studies, women's studies, political science, scholarship, ethnic studies, sociology, American studies and education, we must consider that regardless of one's racial or ethnic background, we are all positioned in relation to Whiteness (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1989; Dixson & Rousseau, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Carbado (2011) argues that scholars must clearly define what Critical Race Theory is to apply and mobilize it as a theory. Carbado (2011) outlines these key concepts as the key characteristics of Critical Race Theory:

(1) CRT rejects the idea the race relations in the US are continually improving; (2) "CRT repudiates the view that the status quo arrangements are the natural results of individual agency

and merit...Racial accumulation - which is economic (shaping both our income and wealth), cultural (shaping the social capital upon which we can draw), and ideological (shaping our perceived racial work- structure our life chances. CRT exposes these inter-generational transfers of racial compensation" (p. 1608); (3) CRT rejects colorblindness and exposes the harm in this worldview; (4) CRT contends that race is a social construct that the American legal system helped to create; and (5) CRT is interconnected to other hegemonic forces like homophobia, patriarchy, and classism. Using this lens also allowed for more nuanced discussions, including storytelling, counter-storytelling, and contextualized accounts of how race impacts individuals in American society (Dixson & Rousseau, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical Race theory is intentionally informing my analysis of the scholarship that I have chosen to discuss in this literature review.

Scope of the Literature Review

This integrative literature review will examine seminal scholarship that has been important to the field of high-achieving Black students. Each section is organized chronologically with the idea that the pedagogical approaches to gifted education continuously evolve. Most of the literature reviewed is within the last 20 years, with references to historical texts when necessary. The literature focuses on Black or African American K-12 students in the United States who are also high-achieving.

Review of Literature

Examining the History of Advanced Placement

The foundational tenets of advanced placement began during the Civil War, and by the 1950s it became a widespread elite testing organization that engenders national praise and critique (Sadler, 2010). The Advanced Placement (AP) ethos is that schools should focus on

ability grouping to provide high-achieving students with more opportunities to extend their education (Sadler, 2010). The ostensible reason for ability grouping is to provide high achieving students with additional enrichment opportunities; yet, apparent economic and racial factors arise from the Advanced Placement selection process. Sadler (2010) also notes that in the 1940s and 50s, there was a growing interest in how to educate advanced students. Some credit the increase in advanced learning opportunities for secondary students to collective cultural movements, like the space race spurred by Sputnik (Sadler, 2010). The Advanced Placement program was intended as college classes and not as a substitute for gifted curriculum in high school (Gallagher, 2009).

The College Board's true antecedents were research projects funded by the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Advancement of Education (FAE). The Kenyon Plan, which was enacted in the 1950s, provided high school students with the opportunity to begin college two years early (Elwell, 1967; Sadler, 2010). The structure was similar to the modern-day AP framework in that students remained in their high school, and their high school teachers taught them their course work, as opposed to removing the high schoolers from their normal social setting and placing them in a college classroom. The thought process was that if students mastered introductory college material while in high school, they could access more advanced material earlier in their college career (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). In 1960, 890 secondary schools participated in the AP program; almost sixty years later, that number has risen to 22,169 (College Board, 2018 data). Even if students do not earn a passing score on the exam, simply taking an AP exam signals that students have opted for more rigorous coursework which can have implications for the college application process (Breland et al., 2002; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009).

In the modern Advanced Placement model, the College Board offers 38 courses in seven different subjects (AP Central, 2022). Each course is modeled after an introductory college course in that content area, and the goal is for students to pass the final exam which can lead to students earning college credit. While the College Board provides a list of course expectations and skills through their Course Expectations Document, teachers create their own syllabi (AP Central, 2022). It is important to note that The College Board does not have quantitative measures that dictates eligibility for the course. If a student is willing and is "academically prepared to accept the challenge of a rigorous academic curriculum" they should be considered for the admission to the course (AP Central, 2022). They also recommend that schools should make an effort to decrease barriers and to encourage diversity in the AP courses, thus allowing students to benefit from their stated benefits, that is, evidence of more rigorous coursework for college admissions and possible college credit.

While there is research to support the assertion that taking AP courses can lead to college success (Hargrove et al., 2007; Keng & Dodd, 2007), Adelman's (1999, 2006) research is considered a foundational resource and is often cited as evidence to justify AP courses in high school (Duffy, 2010). This tenuous relationship has had significant impacts in education. Policy makers have interpreted this relationship as causal meaning that AP classes cause college success. As a result, policy makers and educational administrators have mandated AP programs in schools, the federal government has allocated money to increase enrollment, and schools have begun initiatives to expand their AP programs (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). In 1999, the ACLU filed a lawsuit against the State of California because of the inequities in Advanced Placement course offerings in schools with large Black and Brown populations (aclu.org). This was especially problematic because California's Proposition 209 ended affirmative action for UC

schools; yet, taking Advanced Placement classes still earned students a GPA increase, giving students in predominantly White schools an unfair advantage in college admissions (aclu.org).

Receiving additional GPA points is a distinct advantage of taking AP courses (Solorzano, 2002). Other benefits include: (1) AP classes signal that students have taken a rigorous curriculum; and (2) students enrolled in AP courses usually take the AP exam. If the student earns a three or higher, many universities will grant them college credit (Solorzano, 2002). Bailey et al. (2002) added to this scholarship when they found that programs that provide students with the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school actually increase college access for Black and Brown students. Hess and Rotherham (2007) furthered the arguments suggesting that the proliferation of AP courses could help increase international competitiveness and help close the achievement gap within the United States.

In Klopfenstein and Thomas' (2009) quantitative study, they found that there should be a distinction between "college level" courses and "college preparatory" classes. College level courses denotes students learning collegiate curriculum while "college preparatory" means that students learn the skills to be successful in college, like study skills and note-taking (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Darling-Hammond et al. (2002) found that direct instruction for study skills was extremely beneficial for at risk students in an urban high school setting. Programs like AVID provide students with the opportunity to learn the necessary skills for college which leads to lower attrition rates in college (Watt et al., 2008).

While a correlation between AP course participation and success in college exists, there are additional variables to consider like the student's internal motivation to enroll in the course and the student's racial identity (Klopfenstein, 2003; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2010). Black students do not have equal access to Advanced Placement courses (Klopfenstein, 2003).

Systemic issues such as poverty and systemic racism in school decrease Black students'

likelihood to enroll in AP classes (Klopfenstein, 2003). Given that there is an

underrepresentation of teachers of color in advanced classes, it is unlikely that Black students

who decide to enroll in Advanced Placement classes will have the benefits of having a Black

teacher (Hart, 2020). Black students are more likely to take advanced coursework if there is at

least one Black teacher teaching the course, but taking the course does not translate to achieving

academic success on the AP test (Hart, 2020). Despite this fact, research shows that it is still

better to have Black students take the AP course and experience the advanced coursework

regardless of the AP test results (Hart, 2020; Jackson, 2010).

Acceptance into Gifted Education: Universal Screening vs. Referrals

Teachers tend to be one of the largest influences in the underrepresentation of Black

students in gifted education programs. When assessing students through a deficit thinking

paradigm, educators assume that students cannot perform because of factors such as a lack of

parent involvement or because of learning deficiencies as opposed to evaluating the larger

systems in place that cause Black and brown students to underperform (Hammond, 2015). At

times, this deficit thinking approach is also referred to as implicit bias. "Implicit Bias refers to

the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape our response to certain groups" (Hammond,

2015, p.29). Implicit bias is also known as implicit social cognition and occurs when, for our

purposes, educators allow their stereotypes or attitudes about a group to influence their decisions

and understandings about a student. At times, implicit bias functions as an unconscious process

that tends to have negative academic repercussions for Black students (Benner & Graham, 2013;

Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Sanders, 1997; Steele, 1997; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003).

When teachers need to make placement decisions for students, unfortunately, research indicates that Black students are disproportionately overrepresented in special education classes and underrepresented in classes for high achievers (Elhoweris et al., 2005; Ford, 1998; Ford, 2010). Grissom and Redding's (2015) research revealed that Black students with non-Black teachers are less likely to receive gifted education services, especially in reading (p. 14). They provide a few different reasons for this phenomenon: 1) Educators could be inherently biased; 2) Educators might have racialized views of what high-achievement looks like in students of various ethnicities; and 3) Students could perform differently in the presence of a Black teacher versus in the presence of a non-Black teacher (Grissom & Redding, 2015). Teacher discretion proves to be highly problematic in the identification of high-achieving Black students.

To abate the impact of teachers' implicit bias, some school districts have changed their gifted screening process from teacher and parent recommendations to a universal screening process which adds in an objective measurement tool such as standardized testing.

Whereas Henfield et al. (2008) conducted their research using qualitative analysis via student interviews with 14-year-olds, Card and Guiliano (2016) used third graders' longitudinal records. The student data identified them through student characteristics such as racial identity, primary language, IQ test, and gender. The universal screening process had the following steps: (1) All students take a screening test; (2) If students meet the cutoff score, they participate in an IQ test; (3) If students meet the IQ cutoff score, parents and teachers evaluate students based on a district checklist; and (4) Students are placed in the gifted program. In reviewing their data, one unclear characteristic was the intersectional identities of the students in the study. For example, there were data points for females and data points for Black (non-Hispanic) students, but no differentiation between male and female Black students. Like the aforementioned studies, the

researchers used one term to define Black or African American students. In this study, they decided to use Black rather than African American.

As the scholarship in the field of underrepresentation of minorities in gifted education increased, there was a shift from establishing racial disparities in the classroom, to studying methods that can be used to ameliorate these occurrences. According to Card and Guiliano's (2016) research, universal screening is the best way to make a traditionally inequitable system more equitable. Traditionally, parents and teachers recommend students for advanced learning opportunities, which preserved these spaces as an esoteric world specifically for White students. Card and Guiliano (2016) claim that it is exigent to stop using recommendations as the sole means of referral because the referral system excludes gifted students of color, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged groups. They found that when the school district introduced universal screening as an IQ test, the number of students who made it to the second level of testing needed to qualify for gifted education increased with larger increases for traditionally marginalized students. According to their findings, "The impacts for Blacks and Hispanics are very large: The odds [of being identified for gifted screening] rose by 74% for Blacks and by 118% for Hispanics (the difference between these two is not significant; P = 0.44)" (Card and Guiliano, 2016, p. 13683). With such impactful findings showing the clear benefits of universal screening as an early identifier for student potential, one can infer that using universal screening is best without question, but Lakin (2016) suggested that new inequities arise when using universal screening.

The Problems with Universal Screening

Lakin (2016) reiterates many of the findings in Card and Guiliano's (2016) research but illuminated some gaps in their research that could be an opportunity for further scholarship. Like

Card and Guiliano (2016), Lakin (2016) explains that teacher recommendations are inherently biased and are predictable by race. Teachers, especially White teachers, tend to overlook students of color when asked for recommendations for gifted learning programs (Lakin, 2016). Parent recommendations were equally as problematic because they were often predictable by race (Lakin, 2016). It is this exact issue that Lakin names as a disturbing feature of their gifted screening process. If the process still includes parent and teacher evaluation with a checklist, then students will be subjected to the same biases and misperceptions; however, it will simply occur as the third step instead of the first step. Lakin also pointed out that White students were more likely to advance in the process if they were close to, but just below, the determined cutoff score. Black students were not afforded second chances, contributing to the opportunity gap represented by such studies (Lakin, 2016). Lakin agrees with Card and Guiliano that universal screening can make the gifted student selection process more equitable; however, if there are still biased teachers and overly involved parents usurping the process, then the district will need equity advocates ensuring that the Black students are afforded a fair screening process.

   Ford (2010) identifies four "categorical roadblocks" to Black student representation in high achieving/gifted classes. They are as follows: bias in teacher referrals, student achievement on standardized tests, poor policies and procedures, and concerns from Black students and families regarding well-being in advanced classes. Ford (2010) argues that these barriers are merely symptoms of three larger issues: White privilege, deficit thinking, and colorblindness (Ford, 2010). In addition to these issues, Black students in diverse schools are also subject to opportunity hoarding by White parents (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). According to Lewis and Diamond's (2015) research, White parents want their students to "have diverse experiences, but aren't willing to sacrifice any advantage to ensure that such experience is real and substantive"

(p. 162). Instead of being committed to racial equity, White families in their study were committed to maintaining their White power and privilege. When schools need to make course placement decisions, universal screening becomes an inequitable tool that privileges White parents' voices because parents can override school placement decisions (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). White parents tend to be aware of this loophole and use it to their advantage in their students' placement process. This screening framework shifts from universal screening to parent choice.

Black Student Identity and Academic Outcomes

Expectancy Value Theory suggests that there are two main determinants for student motivation to perform on various tasks: a person's expectancies for success at the task and value they have for being successful (Wingfield, 1994). Therefore, as researchers discuss barriers to representation and positive academic outcomes, one must consider the fact that if students are functioning within a segregated and racist school dynamic and do not see the value of taking and performing well in AP courses, they will be unmotivated to attempt to integrate these spaces and do the work.

Ford (2008) studied the impacts of peer pressure on gifted Black students and examined how that pressure could impact their academic performance. Ford situated her research in four common theoretical frameworks for the gifted Black education field: (1) Michelson's (1990) Attitude-Achievement Paradox, (2) Ogbu's (1987) Secondary Resistance Among involuntary Minority Groups, (3) Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) Acting White phenomenon, and (4) Steele's (1997) Stereotype Threat. Ford's (2008) study seeks to understand low achievement for gifted Black students, and she extends her research to exploring gender differences. Like Jeffries and Silvernail's (2017) study, Ford wanted to capture qualitative data directly from the students;

therefore, she decided to interview students as opposed to teachers, counselors, or administrators. Ford and her research team asked a range of interview questions related to the students' academic experiences and their beliefs about peer pressure. Students were asked a set of open-ended questions related to the ideas of acting Black or acting White. From the results of her study, Ford found that more than one-fourth of the students surveyed felt like they did not put forth their best effort in school, and 69% of students said that they did not do homework on the weekend.

Major themes that arose from this study were around the ideas of acting Black vs. acting White. For the gifted Black students interviewed in this study, acting White is "characterized by (a) language, (b) behavior, (c) intelligence, and attitude" (Ford, 2008, p.230). Acting Black is characterized by conforming to the (negative) stereotypes of Black people (Ford, 2008). When asked why students who are deemed capable do not meet or exceed expectations, most students explained that students are worried about being ridiculed for their achievements (Ford, 2008). A common response is that gifted students are worried about not being accepted by their non-gifted peers as noted in the previous section of this literature review. There also tends to be overconfidence in gifted Black students' skills that do not always cohere with their performance. Ford (2008) also found that gifted Black males are more at risk of being underrepresented and underachieving in gifted classes, but the study did not specify why this is the case.

The concept of acting Black was explored in this study as related to academic performance, but Ford states that there is not much research in this area. Her research indicated that students believed that the idea of acting Black meant "lacking in intelligence, placing a low priority on academics, speaking poorly, behaving poorly, and dressing in ill-fitting clothes" (Ford, 2008). According to this study, gifted Black students associated acting White with

academic achievement. One study that counters Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "Acting White" phenomenon is Carter's (2008) study focused on critical race achievement in Black high school students. Carter's study suggests that Black students can maintain a positive racialized identity while becoming academically successful as a means of social resistance.

Often, high-achieving or gifted Black students in selective enrollment classes experience what DuBois refers to as double consciousness which other researchers have named code-switching. DuBois (2013) unveils the complexity of the Black experience when he describes double consciousness as,

> this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 9)

Black students experience this "two-ness," needing to be two versions of themselves to survive the inherent isolation in segregated classes. A positive outcome of double consciousness is the ability of Black students to be able to thrive in these unwelcoming circumstances; however, one of the negative outcomes is intensely harsh self-criticism. For students, this phenomenon can manifest itself as perfectionism, self-limiting behaviors, and the imposter syndrome (Anderson, 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978; Ford & Harris,1996; Harper, 2019). Imposter syndrome is extreme self-doubt that often manifests itself in high-achieving people who feel that they do not belong among their accomplished peers. Clance and Imes' (1978) original study focused specifically on women who had earned a Ph.D. but struggled to attribute their success to their intelligence; instead, they saw their success as an overestimation of their abilities. While the qualitative study

focused on women, this foundational research spurred additional academic conversations about why this phenomenon exists and how this cognitive dissonance manifests itself in students of color (Edwards, 2019; Peteet et al., 2015).

Henfield et al. (2008) isolate gender as a critical element in Black student success. They found that while Black girls might have displayed academic prowess in their early education, they are less likely to demonstrate their intellectual ability because of societal socialization (Henfield et al., 2008). The girls in the study also mentioned that as compared to their male counterparts, they had the additional gendered barrier or perception of a lack of intelligence because they are female. This fear seemed to lead to a paradoxical academic disengagement; some of the female respondents were so afraid of being ridiculed by their White teachers and peers that they would rather sit through class being confused about a topic than ask for help.

Black Student Identity and Emotional Outcomes

For several decades, educators have researched "belonging" in the classroom; however, there has been an increase in scholarship in this area over the last 20 years. Researcher Donna Ford has written prolifically about the experiences of gifted Black students from a variety of perspectives, including teachers' and students' voices. In 1998, Ford found that several variables lead to underrepresentation in the gifted classroom, including the following: screening and identification, teacher referrals, parent nominations, and self-nominations. Ford (1998) made the following recommendations for recruiting and retaining students of color - use valid and reliable instruments, collect multiple types and sources of information, and provide support services and educational opportunities, provide extensive teacher and school personnel training, increase family involvement, and increase and refocus research and literature. This section explores how student identities impact teachers' perceptions of their abilities as learners.

Black Students and "Belonging" in Advanced Classes

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) set a precedent that students cannot be separated by race; yet, gifted, honors, and AP classes are maintained as predominantly White spaces with teachers and their administrators as the gatekeepers. Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) unequivocally declared that it was illegal to separate schools and classes based on race, yet gifted, honors, and AP classes are maintained as predominantly White spaces with teachers and their administrators as the gatekeepers. In McFadden v. Board of Education for Illinois School District U-46 (2013), Judge Gettlemen ruled that it was illegal for the school district to create a gifted education course specifically for Hispanic children. The judge affirmed that students should not be separated by race; instead of having two separate gifted programs, the district had two separate programs: one that was predominantly (97%) White and one that was for Hispanic students who had matriculated from ELL classes (Ford, 2014). The court also found that the screening instruments that the district used to identify students for their gifted programs were inequitable. Black students are underrepresented in AP courses, and this disparity contributes to widen the educational gaps between Black and White students. These disparities have pernicious effects on students' academic, fiscal, and psychological potential (Ford & King, 2014).

The Supreme Court might have deemed it unconstitutional for schools to separate children by race; yet, the de facto practice became a de jure segregated tracking system perpetuated by parents, teachers, administrators, and even by students. While students are not segregated between schools, they are certainly segregated within schools, which can have lasting implications for students' self-concept (Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2013). Some researchers have found that tracking can have positive outcomes for Black students; however, that occurs when the student is tracked in a higher-level class (Burris, Heubert, & Levin, 2006). Students are

typically separated into three tracks ranging from those with low academic performance to those with high academic performance with the understanding that high performing students will be prepared for college while students in the tracks that are deemed lower-performing are prepared for vocational opportunities (Allen, Farinde, & Lewis, 2013; Oakes, 2005).

While tracking is inequitable for many reasons, Witenko, Mireles-Rios, and Rios (2017) reveal that White students are at an advantage when they are recommended for advanced classes because they will have a network of support (friends in the class, resources, parents) to help them to be successful in the class. Jeffries and Silvernail (2017) found that parents of Black students might try to coerce Black students to take advanced classes, but those overtures will be met with resistance because Black students will not want to experience the racial isolation that is inherent with advanced classes. They also found that while students denied that their peer relationships swayed their decision-making, their data revealed that peer influence was a critical factor in whether or not Black students enrolled in advanced courses (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017).

Elhoweris et al. (2005) use Ford's (1998) research as the basis for their exploration of the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education, but with a slightly different perspective. Elhoweris et al. (2005) present the prevalence of inequities in gifted education selection as the specific result of Brown v. Board of Education. The researchers clearly identified the purpose of the study as an empirical study meant to establish a correlation between student ethnicity and teacher referrals into gifted education. The researchers used stratified cluster sampling of 207 teachers to collect information from a variety of school district employees while also gathering demographic information about the teachers. The researchers gave the teachers only 15 minutes to read the vignettes and decide if the student should be placed in gifted education.

Similar to Ford's (1998) analysis, Elhoweris et al. (2005) found "stereotypical notions on the part of teachers about what an African American student is likely to be capable of may be effectively barring some African American gifted youngsters from participating in gifted and talented programs" (p. 29). The idea that teachers in this study have an innate notion that Black students are incapable of more challenging work is especially troubling in a system that prioritizes teacher recommendations for gifted program selection. In Elhoweris et al.'s research, the major themes that arose were the role of student ethnicity in being identified as gifted and the role of teacher ethnicity in identifying students of color as gifted or high-achieving.

A qualitative study by Henfield et al. (2008) identified a different barrier to Black student representation in gifted education - student choice. Like Elhoweris et al. (2005), Henfield et al. (2008) identified a purpose of their study as a desire to focus on a population of students that are often overlooked in research - gifted students of color. The researchers sought to understand the factors that occlude African American students from gifted education classes, and they wanted to understand the process through the student's perspective. This is different from Elhoweris et al. (2005) in that they focused on the teacher selection process, while Henfield et al. (2008) interviewed 12 African American students (five males and seven females). One outcome from this study was that gifted Black students fear peer rejection, and that fear can be a barrier to taking gifted classes.

As gifted Black students, the respondents in this survey see themselves as being "abnormal" which calls into question why they think that "normal" for Black students is something less than being gifted (Henfield et al., 2008). Based on this information, one can infer that there is a subset of students who opt out of advanced learning opportunities even though they meet the intellectual standards. The researchers were careful to point out that while their

research can loosely make that connection, this inference presents an opportunity for further scholarship in which researchers could interview gifted Black students who qualify for advanced learning opportunities, but choose not to enroll.

In Jeffries and Silvernail's (2017) study, the researchers sought to understand the barriers to Black student enrollment in advanced classes by interviewing Black students who met the criteria for gifted education but decided against taking the coursework. They found that the contributing factors to whether a Black student would take an advanced class included the student's beliefs of the course's difficulty, peer pressure or identity development, and parental involvement.

When Black students are in predominantly White classes with White teachers who may not ascribe to a culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy, students will experience overt racism and more subtle forms referred to as microaggressions (Pierce, 1970; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Microaggressions exist in a liminal space - not quite overt racism, but not a normal interaction. These interactions are often a subtle slight that is grounded in racism, stereotypes, and biases. Microaggressions, implicit bias, and other forms of covert racism create inimical classroom environments for Black students in advanced classes. While microaggressions can seem like small interactions in the moment, they can lasting effects on Black students' confidence causing them to become increasingly diffident in class and can even contribute to diminished mortality (Pierce, 1970; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Social Identity Theory. Social identity theory, a social psychological theory developed by Tajfel (1978), suggests that people define others and themselves according to their membership in certain groups such as religious affiliation, a professional sports team fan base, an ethnic group, or (for our purposes) academic tracks. Individuals evaluate the groups by assuming

that people within the groups share similarities (Legette, 2020). People consider the group they belong to as the ingroup, and the members share similar values, norms, or characteristics (Bruneau et al., 2020; Legette, 2020; Tajfel, 1978). In evaluating the in-groups and out-groups, people tend to assign categories, evaluate those within the in-groups and out-groups, and compare the values that they have ascribed to those individuals (Trepte & Loy, 2017). When schools track students, those students and teachers begin to categorize, compare and assign value to the students in the in-groups and out-groups of the high achieving student groups. Administrators, teachers, and students could assume that students in advanced classes are there because they have the same intelligence level, academic abilities, or motivation (Legette, 2020; Oakes, 2005; Van Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2013)

In the 1990s, Ford noticed the lack of information regarding the experiences of gifted Black students and aimed to fill that void with dozens of studies in this area. Ford and Harris (1998) explored the unique experience of the gifted Black students and the relationship between their Black identity and school experience through a series of interviews with 152 students grades six through nine. Within this study, they used William Cross's Theory of Racial Identity because it was and perhaps still is the most researched theory of Black racial identity. Cross's Nigrescence Model (1991) contends that various stages of Black identity development begin with the pre-encounter phase in which the Black person has little knowledge nor interest in their racial identity. After a racialized incident that proves to be a catalyst for self-exploration, a Black individual will progress along the continuum through the other phases, i.e., "encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment" (Cross, 1995). The final stage is characterized by openness to other cultures while maintaining a positive self-concept of Blackness as their foundational identity (Vandiver et al., 2001).

Ford and Harris (1998) provide justification for their work with the assertion that Black students have many critical issues facing them including increased barriers to a positive racial identity in comparison to their White counterparts. Black students also experience higher levels of stress because of social issues associated with the color of their skin (Ford, 1998). In their study, Ford and Harris (1998) used a modified version of Cross's racial identity model to assess the 152 (64% female and 36% male) Black middle and high school students' racial identity. In addition to this quantitative measure, they also developed three interview questions that focused on race and achievement.

The mean data collected from Cross's identity model suggests that the majority of students surveyed have positive racial identities; yet, in comparison to Black male students, Black female students held negative and weak identities about being Black (Ford & Harris, 1998). While Ford and Harris'(1998) study focused on a large group with a mixed-methods approach, Michelle Scott (2014) came to similar conclusions by conducting a qualitative interview with one students' mother. The benefit of this style of study is that the mother, Vivian, provided elaborate detail supporting their daughter's educational experience which helped to paint a larger picture. The limitations of the study were that they only collected data about one student which could make the results less generalizable. Another limitation is that the information about the daughter's experience was filtered through the mother's viewpoint as opposed to being directly collected from the student.

Tracking, Ability Grouping, Race, and Emotional Outcomes

Jeanie Oakes (1990), a preeminent researcher on tracking, extols the virtues of detracking as a means to have a more inclusive environment. According to Oakes et al. (1990), detracking helps to broaden the definition of intelligence while creating inclusion and diversity (racial and

intellectual) in the classroom. In the United States, Blacks, Latinx, and Indigenous students are underrepresented in advanced courses such as honors, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and other forms of gifted classes, creating an academic hierarchy based on race (Lewis, 2015; Tyson 2013). White and Asian students tend to be overrepresented in these courses (Tyson, 2013). This phenomenon is especially noticeable in racially diverse schools when White students occupy most of the spots in the advanced courses while their Black and Brown counterparts are tracked into less rigorous classes; this is often referred to as a school within a school (Lewis, 2015; Tyson, 2013). Tracking is a form of modern segregation that limits educational opportunities for Black students (Burris & Welner, 2005; Caughlan & Kelly, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Legette, 2018; Tyson, 2011). Tracking reinforces negative stereotypes for the students in advanced classes and those that are in nongifted classes (Legette, 2018).

Ability grouping is sometimes used synonymously with tracking and the meaning changes depending on the source (Oakes, 1985). Ability grouping and tracking are similar in that in their purest form, they are means of providing students with educational experiences that match their performance (Loveless, 2013; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016; Tieso, 2003). However, there are important differences between the two. One difference that researches note is that ability grouping tends to occur in elementary school while tracking occurs in late middle school or high school (Loveless, 2013).

Ability grouping can refer to within-class ability grouping and between-class ability grouping (Tieso, 2003). Students can be placed in groups based on their performance level on pre or post-assessments. Ability groups (whether in-class or between classes) are based on performance in a specific subject and can be changed. At an elementary school level, between-class grouping allows for all students to leave their classroom to received leveled instruction

based on their skills. After the instructional period, they return to whole group instruction with their peers (Tieso, 2003). This approach is based on the Joplin Plan, devised by Cecil Floyd in 1945 (Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Some of the advantages to between-class grouping is that students learn the skills that are matched to their performance needs, teachers create curriculum specific to that level, and their home classroom is still academically diverse (Tieso, 2003). Like tracking, a major disadvantage could be inequitable grouping practices; however, Tieso openly critiques Oakes' on inequitable practices in ability grouping stating that lower performing students could prefer being grouped with similarly skilled students because they will not feel the stress of being with students who appear to be stronger students (Tieso, 2003).

In-class ability grouping allows for small group instruction for student of varying skill levels (Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Tieso, 2003). Teachers differentiate instruction for the class by moving from one group to another while teaching each small group the appropriate skills for their performance level (Loveless, 2013). Students have the benefit of small group instruction without the logistical challenges of switching classrooms during the day (Tieso, 2003). Often, ability grouping in elementary school turns to tracking by high school, and rarely do high school upper classmen return to ability grouping (Loveless, 2013). While this might be true, as school remove systemic barriers to AP courses, there could be a wider range of ability levels in those courses which could create the need for in-class ability grouping within AP courses.

Exploring racial identity is critical when considering Black students' experiences and outcomes in advanced classes because non-White students are traditionally placed into non-honors level classes (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Legette, 2018; Oakes, 1990). This phenomenon is traditionally racially predictable and can have lasting negative implications for students of color as they develop an understanding of what it means to be Black, and as they decide on how

important their racial identity is to them. This conflation of identity, race, and academics can lead to stereotype threat, a phenomenon developed by Claude M. Steele (1995). Steele defines stereotype threat as a mental barrier that arises whenever an African American student is asked to perform an academic task. The students are threatened with the prospect of confirming negative stereotypes about their racial group. This immediate threat can have lasting effects in that students may disengage from school due to the perceived pressure to maintain or obtain a particular identity. Aronson and Steele (2005) contend that one's academic performance is not simply a product of what is in their mind but is wholly influenced by how one feels. A Black student's competence, learning, and motivation are directly linked to their sense of belonging and how well others treat them (Aronson & Steele, 2005). Classes that instill a sense of belonging through a collaborative working environment yield better academic outcomes for their minoritized groups (Eddy & Hogan, 2014; Freeman et al., 2011).

Researchers disagree about whether stereotype threat is truly linked to disengagement from an intellectual self-concept. Smalls et al. (2007) argue that cultivating a strong racial identity grounded in affirming conceptions of Blackness can lead to academic achievement. Legette's (2018) study found that while the Black students were proud of their Black heritage, tracking can have a negative effect on their development of a positive Black identity. In Legette's mixed-methods study, using interviews and surveys, they studied 20 students, 14 of whom were girls and six were boys. The students were asked questions about their career interests, opinions about themselves and others as Black students, thoughts on tracking, and experiences with teachers and peers. The honors students felt like their honors teachers reinforced their esteemed academic abilities while those teachers equally disparaged non-honors students. The concept of being advanced weighed heavily on the gifted Black students in this

study. In the absence of detracked, inclusive classes, some students chose to "code-switch" to ensure social and academic success.

Black students struggle emotionally in advanced classes because of the inimical experiences that they encounter in these classes and because of negative peer pressure (Ford et al., 2008; Gratham & Ford, 2003). Students struggle with developing a healthy self-concept because they are often stuck in a liminal social space of being Black in a predominantly White class and not being Black enough when with their Black peers (Grantham & Ford, 2003). High achieving Black students can experience advanced classes as a success that comes at a great loss, in essence, a "pyrrhic victory" (Fordham, 1988; Ogbu, 2004). "Feelings of loneliness, isolation, and rejection increase, and the need for affiliation begins to outweigh the need for achievement" (Grantham & Ford, 2003, p. 22). Since students cannot control how others view them or how others treat them in advanced classes, they respond by taking control of what is within their sphere of influence: their grades and their enrollment. Black students in advanced classes respond to this identity crisis by choosing to take easier classes in which they will see their other Black peers or they choose to underperform in their advanced classes (Ford, 1996; Ogbu, 2003).

White Racial Identity Development and Education

In the United States, 79% of teachers are White, and 52% of students identify as a BIPOC (non-White) group. Of the 52%, 18% of those students are Black (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). When one considers Black students' experiences in AP classes, researchers must consider that most of the teachers are White. These numbers are in contrast with the number of Black students who take advanced courses. For example, in 2020, 8.8% of Black students in the class of 2020 took an AP exam, compared to 47.6% of White students (The College Board).

White identity development research calls for the need for White Americans to acknowledge the inherent racism in this country, how they are shaped by it and how they benefit from it. Researchers of White, Asian, and Black descent have examined White identity development and have created theories with distinct stages that define the continuum on which White identity development rests (Ponterotto et al., 2006; Helms, 1984; Sue, 2003). While there were existing models of Black identity development (Cross, 1971, Dizard, 1970), a gap existed in terms of White racial identity development that Hardiman (1982), Helms (1984), and Ponterotto (1988) aimed to fill with their theories of White racial identity development. Like Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development and Cross's (1971) model of Black identity development, Hardiman's (1982) is defined by stages of development; however, Hardiman had five stages grouped by age with four transition periods between phases.

> These stages areas follows: (1) No Social Consciousness which is characterized by a lack of awareness of racial differences and racism; (2) Acceptance, marked by the acceptance of White racist beliefs and behaviors and the unconscious identification with Whiteness; (3) Resistance, characterized by the rejection of internalized racist beliefs and messages and rejection of Whiteness; (4) Redefinition, marked by the development of a new White identity that transcends racism; (5) Internalization, marked by the integration of the new White identity into all other aspects of the identity and into consciousness and behavior (viii).

Hardiman's (1982) research reveals that like Cross's (1971) model, people might get stuck at one phase and never progress to the next one. According to Hardiman's research, it is probable that White people might learn about and accept their racial identity in stage two, but they might not ever question their privilege in society. Progressing to stage three can be a

difficult and painful process replete with guilt and shame over past and present events. During stages four and five, the White people tend to jettison their former White identity and rebuild their new White identity which is founded on pride and a desire to liberate other White people from the earlier stages of development. White people in stage five will also seek to understand other forms of oppression and how they might dismantle those systems.

Like Hardiman, Helms (1984) was also working on a model of White identity development that would question the extent to which White people participate in and knowingly benefit from the racist structures in America. In the most recent iteration of Helm's work, Helms and Cook (1999) include seven ego statuses in their White identity model: disintegration, reintegration, pseudoindependence, immersion, emersion, autonomy. Also like Hardiman, the last two stages in Helms and Cook's (1999) White identity model illustrate a White individual who is confident in their positive White identity, and they reject and actively avoid involvement in racial oppression. These stages are also characterized by the aspect of encouraging others to examine their Whiteness and their roles in race relations in society.

Ponterotto (1988) outlined a model with the following four stages: pre-exposure, exposure, zealot-defensive, and integration. While Hardiman and Helms' work applied to those who identify as White from European descent, Ponterotto's work was specific to White counselors. In the pre-exposure phase, White counselors have not considered their White racial identity. In stage two, the encounter phase, counselors are challenged to consider how their race might inform their practice. Stage three, the zealot-defensive phase, is marked by anger and guilt about their White identity; this phase is similar to some of the mid-late stages of Hardiman and Helm's theories. In the final stage, Integration, the counselor begins to celebrate their racial and

ethnic identity. They feel empowered to combat racism, and they have a desire to explore other kinds of oppression related to one's social identities (Ponterotto, 1988).

While all identity theories seem to have an element of self-love, it is important to note that while the goal of Black identity theories is self-love, White individuals are expected to move beyond self-love to a final stage of information sharing and fighting oppression. The scholarship on White racial identity has progressed over the years and has extended specifically to the education field (Howard, 2004), but Helms'(1984, 1995) work still seems to be the prevailing theory in White identity (Simons et al., 2011). Recently, there have been some discrepancies regarding whether White individuals in the advanced developmental stages truly display cultural competence and understand their White privilege or if they have simply developed multicultural literacy skills (Simons et al., 2011).

With a predominantly White teaching force, understanding not only their racial identity journey but also their introspection into their White racial identity development is critical to understanding how White teachers will build relationships with their Black students. Whiting and Ford (2009) found that teacher referrals were responsible for 58.8 % of AP student enrollment, therefore, making guidance counselors and teachers critical gatekeepers to participation rates. Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) suggest that teacher education programs should prepare pre-service teachers to recognize giftedness in racially minoritized students. In addition to referrals, teacher interactions and relationships can have a significant impact on student enrollment (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017). Siegle, Rubenstein and Mitchell (2014) found that successful college students attributed their success to being motivated by a high school teacher. The teachers in that study also encouraged the student to continue taking rigorous coursework beyond high school.

While two waves of scholarship specific to White teacher identity exist, the research shows the ways that White students and teachers evade racialized discussions in spite of an outward desire to achieve opposite goals (Borsheim-Black, 2018). Terms associated with this first wave of teacher identity development were "colorblindness" and race-evasiveness (Jupp et al., 2016; Steeler, 1993). These first waves were critiqued because they presented White identity development as "monolithic, static and linear" (Borsheim-Black, 2018). In response to this emerging viewpoint, researchers created the second wave of teacher identity development that shifted from the monolithic experience to one that is complex, fluid, and intersectional (Asher, 2007; Borsheim-Black, 2018; Johnson, 2013; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Lensmire & Snaza, 2010; Mason, 2016). While each of these studies created a more complex understanding of White identity, Berchini (2016) and LaDuke (2009) begin to make the connection from White identity development to culturally responsive education.

Their studies reveal that sometimes progressing to advanced stages of White identity development does not always translate to culturally responsive teaching because of barriers like institutional philosophy and resources. Jeffries and Silvernail (2017) argue for teachers of all identities to use culturally responsive education to create a more inclusive environment in which their marginalized students will thrive. They write, "teachers who use inclusive, equity-based instructional strategies advantage marginalized students' ability to achieve success in academically demanding courses" (p.73). The research reveals that White teachers must make an intentional choice to understand their White identity and to apply that knowledge to their pedagogy and teaching methods.

Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Education

Paulo Freire (2000) writes that the pedagogy of the oppressed is a "humanist and liberation pedagogy" with two stages. The first stage calls for educators to jettison the oppressors' mythologies and misinformation to inculcate themselves and others with transformational information to empower the oppressed (p. 55). Henry Louis Gates (1988) echoes this idea when he says that enslaved African Americans had to begin creating counter-narratives and reconstructing their own identities when they arrived in Virginia. The second stage is to transform the oppressed and oppressors' consciousness, ethics, and worldviews (Freire, 2000). Ultimately the goal should be to create and sustain an anti-racist worldview in the classroom and beyond. Kendi (2019) defines anti-racist ideology as "any idea that suggests the racial groups are equal in all their apparent differences – that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequalities" (p. 20). To truly have culturally responsive education, educators must commit to being antiracist and commit to antiracist policies and practices in their classrooms.

Like Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, culturally responsive education has two elements: (1) culturally responsive curriculum, and (2) culturally responsive pedagogy. The distinction between the two is that the culturally responsive curriculum calls on educators to think about what and where they are teaching, while culturally responsive pedagogy asks educators to critique who, why, and how they are teaching.

Literature focused on high achieving students shows that they have a complex position in school, one that could bring privilege and prestige or pain. Researchers have begun providing recommendations for what teachers and administrators can change in order to bring equity to this problematic space. Their recommendations can be categorized into five distinct actions that

teachers can take to improve the Black student experience in advanced classes groups: instilling a positive view of Blackness, teacher goal setting, cultivating a safe learning environment, creating a multicultural curriculum, and providing teachers with meaningful mentorship opportunities.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Schiro (2013) describes the social reconstruction curriculum ideology as one that upholds the notion that issues such as racism, sexism, poverty, and hegemony are shaped and maintained through schools' "hidden curriculum" which elevates Eurocentric values (Schiro, 2013). Schiro's explanation of this ideology establishes that teachers should consider issues like race, gender, and poverty as a part of their pedagogy. Researchers characterize culturally responsive pedagogy as teaching that allows students to leave school feeling empowered to transform the world by challenging our society's current notions of equity and justice (Ladson-Billings, 1995). hooks, (2014) explains how just the idea of Black students learning was "counterhegemonic" in a racist society. When desegregation upends her all-Black schooling, her motivation changes with the racial dynamic of her school. She explains that the "shift from beloved, all-Black schools to White schools where Black students were always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging, taught me the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination" (hooks, 1994, p. 4). By losing her sense of community, she also lost her purpose for education. The collective counter-hegemonic purpose most likely fueled students' intrinsic motivation to learn and grow. At their old (predominantly Black) school, the students knew that their success was contributing to something greater than any one of their potential individual success stories; however, after experiencing the isolation and lack of belonging in their new predominantly White schools, hooks argues that the students lost the will

to engage in school. One can envision a sense of community in which teachers encouraged students, interacted with them in and outside of school, and taught lessons that made references to ideas that were culturally relevant.

Unfortunately, conformity, and not transformation, are usually the goals of education. Patricia Hinchey (2010) argues that schools were created for social reproduction. Hinchey writes, "Today's public schools have grown out of the common school movement of the early 1800s based on the idea that a common education for all would benefit society in several ways...Common schools were created to help create a compliant and patriotic populace" (p.11). To improve society, students and educators must be cognizant of challenging the current social norms so that all can thrive. This includes considering each individual's needs based on their ethnicity, gender, race, and class. Social reconstructionists' goals are not meant to be fractious or contentious, rather, much like their social efficiency counterparts, their goal is meant to be focused on societal improvements without stagnation. Social reconstructionists want to challenge the inherent hegemony that exists and functions to the detriment of people of color and other marginalized groups in academic spaces. For teachers to effectively reach these goals, they must learn methods that extend beyond their content area to culturally responsive curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy (Kretchmar & Zeichner, 2016). Kretchmar and Zeichner (2016) write,

> The social and political frame is typically focused on helping teachers recognize their
> own privilege and biases in order to provide k-12 students tools to operate inside of a
> classist and racist system, rather than providing teachers with the tools to challenge the
> system. This approach often positions the teacher as the savior. (p. 420)

By positioning the teacher as the savior, teacher education programs perpetuate a myth that these students have little value or agency and that they need to be saved - a deficit mindset (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Yet, Christopher Emdin (2016) debunks the myth of the apathetic urban school student while revealing the pedagogical norms that are apparent in everyday places like the salon, barbershop, and church. In these communities, the local pastor or hairstylist has mastered the techniques necessary to engage neoindigenous youth, and he argues that teachers should try to replicate those methods. In his model, community members who interact with the population daily understand how to engage with the students. Emdin's approach seems to answer Kretchmar and Zeichner's (2016) critique of the teacher 2.0 or reformer approach to teacher education. In Kretchmar and Zeichner's (2016) teacher 2.0 model, pre-service teachers are usually prepared almost exclusively to teach lower-income students; however, they are not taught about the larger systems of oppression that exist in a society that impacts students daily.

Charlotte Danielson's (2013) model is the prevailing teacher evaluation framework, and while Audre Lourde cautions reformers not to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, it is important to find methodologies that help teachers to use a culturally responsive approach for the system within which they work (Ladson-Billings, 2016). In Domain 1 of Charlotte Danielson's (2013) framework, teachers are reminded that in order to be successful educators, they must know their craft and their students; yet, even the most meticulous teacher can struggle with educating their students if they do not move beyond their Child Development 101 conceptions of knowing students to actually building relationships with them.

Emdin (2016) invites teachers to jettison their savior complexes and their Aristotelian philosophical notions for what he calls, Reality Pedagogy. In Emdin's conception of teacher preparation, a model of Kretchmar and Zeichner's teacher preparation 3.0, teachers should focus

more on the individuals in their class rather than a pre-set curriculum or standardized test. Emdin (2016) cautions teachers to, "teach directly to students" and goes on to say," Every educator who works with the neoindigenous must first recognize their neoindigeneity and teach from the standpoint of an ally who is working with them to reclaim their identity" (p. 40). As part of teacher education, he suggests that teachers get to know their students and allow students to get to know them. This strategy could make the teacher more vulnerable and could upend the tacit or explicit power dynamic that exists in the classroom. Danielson (2013) has a similar claim in her explanation of Domain 1b - Demonstrating knowledge of students. In considering why "knowing students" is important Danielson (2013), argues that, "Teachers don't teach content in the abstract; they teach it to students. In order to ensure student learning, therefore, teachers must know not only their content and its related pedagogy, but also the students to whom they wish to teach that content" (p.11). Knowing students and seeing them as individual learners helps teachers to craft meaningful lessons and assessments which can help to spark students' active intellectual engagement with the content.

Beyond knowing students' various learning styles, researchers like Zaretta Hammond (2015) argue that understanding students' ethnicities and using that knowledge for planning and instruction can also have positive impacts on student growth. Hammond (2015) argues that "when used effectively, culturally responsive pedagogy has the ability to help students' intellective capacity, also called fluid intelligence...Intellective capacity is the increased power the brain creates to process information more effectively" (p. 17). By increasing their intellective capacity, students are able to learn more and are given the opportunity to display their knowledge. If using culturally responsive techniques can increase intellective capacity, then it is

possible that the inverse might be true - not using culturally responsive methodologies can be harmful to students (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2016).

Delpit (2012) provides a comprehensive list of pedagogical strategies that educators should use to ensure excellence for their Black and brown students. These strategies include themes such as: (1) the importance of a strong familial teacher-student relationship; (2) the importance of recognizing the students' culture, strengths, and humanity; and (3) the importance of maintaining high expectations that challenge students to use critical thinking while creating inroads for students to access basic skills. Hammond (2015) outlines four areas of culturally responsive pedagogy that bridge the gap between teacher practice and student cognition. In Practice Area I of Hammond's theory, teachers should build awareness of their cultural identity and how their cultural lens impacts student learning. Practice Area II includes building relationships, setting high expectations, and giving specific and encouraging feedback. Hammond (2015) argues that our brains are specifically wired for building relationships and sees this step as an especially important one in student success. In Practice Area III, teachers should understand how students process information and adapt their lessons based on cultural models. Lastly, Practice Area IV guides teachers to create a learning environment in which students feel intellectually and socially safe. The classroom should "reinforce self-directed learning and academic identity" (Hammond, 2015, p.20) Researchers also suggest that teachers should create a safe space for students to share their experiences and receive positive affirmation and encouragement (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Gay, 2018). Using culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy can help to mitigate some of the negative effects of being in an advanced class that Ogbu (2004) and Fordham (1991) have outlined in their research. The culturally responsive classroom should also allow students to

experience success at regular intervals to build confidence (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). Just because a student is gifted, that does not mean that they will not need help in specific areas.

Teachers should also discuss perfectionism explicitly in culturally responsive and sensitive ways (Anderson, 2020). Teachers should share strategies that may help students cope with their self-doubt and anxiety levels that can occur in advanced classes where there are few Black students (Anderson, 2020). And when students fail or earn a grade less than what they desire, teachers should use that moment as an opportunity for learning instead of it being a moment that permanently defines the student and erodes their confidence. Scott (2014) recommends that teachers should practice goal setting with their Black students by setting high expectations for them and working with them to achieve those goals. Students need to see the relationship between hard work and success (Ford, 2008). If teachers see a student who places more of a priority on their social life or athletics than education, the teacher must intervene on an individual level or in small groups (Ford, 2008). Overall, teachers need to create an environment that allows students to see that the teacher is knowledgeable and truly cares about their academic and social well-being.

Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Historically, Black people have been misrepresented in American history or simply omitted from the discourse so that White teachers would not have to recount the violence and oppression on which our society was built (Au, Brown, Calderon, 2016). Carter G. Woodson (1933/1996) recognized that the Eurocentric curriculum taught in American classrooms strips African Americans of their identity and supports the status quo of maintaining institutionalized and systemized racism. Coates (2015) writes, "Our history was inferior because we were inferior, which is to say our bodies were inferior. And our inferior bodies could not possibly be

afforded the same respect as those that built the West" (p. 44). American schooling teaches a myopic view of the Black experience that does not reach beyond their identity as an oppressed people, that is, "the paternalism of slavery and labor" (Au, Brown, Calderon, 2016, p. 120).

So much of education is about distilling information and controlling marginalized peoples (Coates, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2016). Woodson (1933/1996), an advocate for self-determination writes, "If you can control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself with what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status (p. 40). Woodson (1933/1996) challenges educators to ensure a safe learning environment for all children which is free from destructive biases.

Hilliard (2014) argues that educational institutions have tried to diminish "critical consciousness" in Black students; they have also attempted to alienate Black students from each other and their traditions to maintain White supremacy. For students to learn about a non-western view of history, they must find a course that focuses specifically on African history as an elective. Typically, these courses are categorized as an elective because, as Coates points out, African history is often deemed inferior by White Americans. In the unfortunate cases when schools try to integrate the African American experience into their curriculum, it is done to present Blacks as either the oppressed slave or the peaceful (still oppressed) civil rights worker. In the most harmful cases, they attempt to teach critical thinking skills by having students argue in favor of slavery or calculate the profit they would make from selling a slave (Picower, 2021). Woodson (1933/1996) likens this misinformed and racist teaching practice to violence when he writes, "to handicap a student by teaching him that his Black face is a curse and that the struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills his

aspirations..." (p. 24). There are very rarely images of Black empowerment or an acknowledgment of Africa as the cradle of civilization (Coates, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2016).

Critical race theory suggests that current instructional practices work from a deficit mindset, and in order to educate Black students, teachers must reject deficit models in favor of teaching strategies that help all students (Ladson-Billings, 2016). Teachers should incorporate a multicultural curriculum to help instill a positive racial identity for students and increase rigor and differentiation (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Scott, 2014). The multicultural curriculum should extend to the gifted classroom and should not just be for classes in which Black students are the majority (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Ford, 2008). Teachers and administrators should interrogate the curriculum for aspects that reinforce "curricular violence" which refers to "the deliberate manipulation of academic programming in a manner that ignores or compromises the intellectual and psychological well-being of learners" (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011, p.2). Curriculum violence can manifest itself as omitting pertinent information from history, presenting a biased perspective, omitting cultural values, or falsifying information to oppress various ethnic groups (Allen et al., 2013).

Anderson and Martin (2018) argue that it is important for gifted Black students to focus on the process of learning as opposed to being results-oriented. There must be a balance between learning for self-edification and merely getting a good grade. Learning must also be recognized as a means to improving the students' self-image (Ford, 2008). Celise, the student in Scott's (2014) study, had very dark skin, and her mother attributed the negative treatment that Celise experienced to her skin color. Therefore, Scott (2014) recommends that teachers provide students with books that show a range of skin tones. She also recommends that students be prepared for

"colorism encounters;" however, Scott does not say if the teachers, parents, or both are responsible for teaching about colorism.

Students need a curriculum that is replete with images of liberation and hope to provide a source of motivation and to affirm their positive Black identity development (Anderson; 2020; Joseph, et al., 2016; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Price-Dennis et al., 2017). The curriculum should include representations of Black people as scholars (Ford et al., 2008). Most schools do not attempt to teach an inclusive curriculum, leading Black students to become disconnected and disinterested in school (Banks & Banks, 1995; Grantham & Ford, 2003). These issues ultimately lead to underachievement (Banks & Banks, 1995; Grantham & Ford, 2003). Banks (1995) developed a framework for multicultural curriculum reform that revealed four ways in which multicultural experiences can be included in a curriculum. Level 1, the Contributions Approach, is the most frequently used and includes recognizing heroes and holidays, usually on specific days of the year. Level 2, the Ethnic Additive Approach, entails adding multicultural perspectives to a unit still grounded in mainstream Eurocentric principles. Level 3, the Transformation Approach, is different from the first two levels; the curriculum is structured around multiple perspectives instead of adding them to an already established, dominant perspective. Level 4, the Decision-Making and Social Action Approach, takes the ideals from the Transformation Approach and adds social consciousness and social action to the curriculum. Students practice problem-solving through action-oriented strategies to learn the importance of participatory citizenship.

Ford and Harris (1999) used Banks' (1993) and Bloom's (1956) work to create their own model for culturally responsive teaching. Bloom's Taxonomy is a continuum that classifies student thinking on a continuum of six different categories. From low-level activities to high-

level questions, they are as follows: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Ford and Harris (1999) challenge teachers to apply Bloom's Taxonomy to Banks' levels to increase students' depth of understanding (Ford, et al., 2005). Researchers such as Gholdy Muhammad (2020) have created new frameworks for assessing curricula, specifically prioritizing a counter-hegemonic curriculum. Muhammad's (2020) Historical Responsive Literacy (HRL) Framework differs from other frameworks in that she argues that the goal should not be to empower students - instead, teachers (and students) should recognize that Black students are already powerful; teachers just need to learn how to access and assess that power. This equity framework includes four learning goals: 1) identity development; 2) skill development; 3) intellectual development; and 4) criticality (Muhammad, 2020). She developed these goals based on her research of 19th and early 20th century Black literary societies with the underlying epistemological belief that literacy was (and still is) central to one's education. This framework helps students to learn resilience, confidence, and normalize Black excellence.

Gaps and Future Research

While scholars have written extensively about Black identity, each researcher noted that there was limited scholarship in gifted Black education. There was also a noticeable lack of research that distinguished Black (students from the diaspora) from African American students. This can be an important distinction in terms of student identity, which could inform their emotional and academic outcomes in the gifted education classes. In addition to exploring the nuances in their racial identity, a recurring motif in the literature was the students' socio-economic status and the role that the parents played in perpetuating what some refer to as respectability politics. Researchers briefly mentioned, but did not delve into how parents contribute to the narrative that their advanced students are perhaps better than their non-gifted

peers and that they should distance themselves from those peers. Some researchers suggested that teachers' identity development has an impact on Black student enrollment and performance, however, they recommended qualitative data (interviews with students) to gather more information on this connection. Lastly, over the last 20-30 years there has been an increase in the amount of scholarship around the Black female experience; yet, that intersection of gender and race was minimally noted in the research about gifted Black students.

Researchers also need to document racial disparities in areas like education in order to reveal and to heal from institutional trauma. Future research should be aimed at revealing the conditions, structures, policies, and procedures that cause underrepresentation of high achieving Black students in AP classes. This study is like a light that passes through the aperture of a camera thus creating a clear understanding of Black students' historic and present experiences – both positive and negative. Further research will identify evidence-informed scholarship that has the power to reduce or even eliminate inequities in the AP Classroom.

Summary

Ford (1998) provides justification for her research with the assertion that Black students have many critical issues facing them, including increased barriers to a positive racial identity in comparison to their White counterparts. The research reveals that even when Black student earn qualifying scores on seemingly objective exams, they are still less likely to be selected for gifted placement. When they are enrolled in advanced classes, Black students also experience higher levels of stress because of social issues associated with the color of their skin. The conflicts begin before the students are even admitted into advanced class. Universal screening is good in theory, but students' screening is still dependent on a test that is written for and by White people. Another problem with universal screening is that the process will remain biased as long as

parents and teachers can give recommendations that sway the final placement. The literature also reveals that concepts of Black identity and academic success are complex – student placement and their identity are inextricably connected. What is important is that teachers intentionally diversify their classroom demographics and include antiracist curriculum and pedagogy. With these changes in mind, the gifted classroom will become a more inclusive, supportive, and edifying space for Black students.

Chapter III: Methodology

There is a co-dependency between humans and the world that they inhabit, like the role of the researcher and subject. A researcher needs subjects in order to conduct their research, and the subjects need the researcher to bring meaning to and make sense of the data that they produce from interviews, questionnaires, and other forms. Within the notion of intentionality, I specifically love the active nature inherent in this ontology. My hope is that when people seek to make meaning of the world around them, they are actively engaging in the world, with a wide range of people and places in order to create authentic meanings based on their experiences. The meaning that individuals create varies greatly by culture and experience; the object is shaped by a person's consciousness.

As various researchers have established, human beings have the power to construct meaning; however, there are some limitations within that freedom. Some of the most relevant experiences which dictate a person's worldview are their race, gender, and socioeconomic status; knowing that there are those limitations inspires me to want to change the educational structures in place. Through this research, used my voice and power as an educator to provide students of color with tools to "interrogate knowledge" and speak truth to power. This study has added to scholarship in minority student achievement so that educators can move beyond a deficit model to one in which researchers can amplify, sustain and replicate positive self-concepts for high-achieving Black students.

In the following sub-section, I will describe the purpose of the study, how the research was particularly suited for qualitative research, and I will explain my qualitative methodology. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) "qualitative research is distinct from quantitative research" (p.185). Qualitative research allows the researcher to ask questions that can add depth

and understanding to the students' experiences. My research site has extensive quantitative data that provides critical information about the Black student experience in AP classes; however, using a qualitative approach allows me to ask questions illuminating "how" and "why" the students have specific experiences. Allowing students to use their voice will also allow them to continue to see themselves as valued scholars in a system that does not always prioritize their humanity.

Rationale for Research Design

In this critical race theory (CRT) oriented study, I sought to understand the essence of the Black experience in predominantly White academic spaces. Using a phenomenological methodology, I analyzed the significant moments and statements that the participants shared about their experiences with the curriculum, grading, and social interactions in the classroom. In phenomenology, the researcher focuses on "how the person experiences the phenomenon in the moment, rather than recalling events from the past" (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p.88). The researcher constructs meaning and synthesizes the information from a series of interviews with the participants (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). According to Welman and Kruger (1999), "phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved" (p. 89). Each individual's experiences are subjective, meaning that it is important to explore each participant's experiences to examine the depth of the phenomenon (Johnson & Parry, 2015). "For participants from historically marginalized groups, the time and attention that phenomenology requires often provide the first space to tell their story in depth. It may also be the first time they have been valued for telling it" (Johnson & Parry, 2015, p. 102). In illuminating high achieving Black students' stories, this work will offer multiple perspectives of this phenomenon.

In addition to offering multiple perspectives, phenomenology, from a social justice standpoint, is a useful methodology when the researcher strives to "maintain awareness of our socialization and related stereotypes about various individuals and communities" (Johnson & Parry, 2015, p. 105). I see phenomenology as a methodology in which researchers and participants co-create a beautiful mosaic. Each individual glass tile (person's experiences) adds to the wonder and textuality of the entire work of art. None of the tiles are the same. Perhaps if separated out individually, each one wouldn't be as noticeable; however, when placed together and analyzed as a collective work within a specific context, one can ascribe a much deeper meaning to the phenomenon.

This artistic view of phenomenology is particularly appropriate for the AP Literature classroom because the course is essentially a study of novels and poetry as the highest artistic form. The class analyzes texts by ascribing meaning to patterns that students notice in the texts. In essence, the methodological approach mimicked the curricular structure. Van den Berg, translated by Van Manen (1997), writes,

> [Phenomena] have something to say to us - this is common knowledge among poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologists. Or rather, we are all born phenomenologists; the poets and painters among us, however, understand very well their task of sharing, by means of word and image, their insights with others - an artfulness that is also laboriously practiced by the professional phenomenologist. (p.41)

Like an artist, I intended to reveal these experiences through the interviews; however, instead of paint or literary devices, my tools were my data collection and analysis methods.

I sought to deconstruct and analyze how race informs the students' experiences in their Advanced Placement English classes. I drew upon phenomenological methodology by

interviewing seven high-achieving Black students. This group's perspectives are largely missing from research, especially when researchers look at gender and race as intersectional identities. Moustakas (1994) asserts that another feature of phenomenology is, "the emphasis on intuition, imagination, and universal structures in obtaining a picture of the dynamics that underlay the experience, account for, and provide an understanding of how it is that particular perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and sensual awarenesses are evoked in consciousness with reference to a specific experience such as jealousy, anger, or joy"(p. 22). There is not much research relating to high achieving students and their experiences with joy in the AP classroom. This study amplifies other critical emotions and experiences. It reveals the strength, resilience, and brilliance of these young scholars while also creating a detailed mosaic of their lived experiences.

Research Setting and Context

According to the school website, this diverse suburban high school district is ranked in the top 2-3% in the country, they have a 90% five-year graduation rate, and the students speak over 43 languages (School Website). The school has roughly 3,800 students, and according to the Illinois School Report Card, the research site's racial demographics are as follows: 45.8% White, 26% Black, 18.7% Hispanic, 5.8% Asian, Two or More Races 3.3%, American Indian 0.2%, and Pacific Islander 0.1%. As a part of the school culture, there is a strong focus on academic excellence and social justice as evidenced by the school mission statement, school board prioritization, professional development, instructional coaching, evaluation measures and course offerings. In 2021-2022 school year, the school offered 37 AP courses across seven departments. This high school is even one of 60 schools in the country that will be piloting the new Advanced Placement American-American studies course (Hartocollis, 2022).

The school does not offer IB or gifted classes, as a result, Advanced Placement courses are the most rigorous coursework option for students at this school. Each grade has about 900 students. In the 2022-2023 school year, a total of 374 students chose to take AP Language (the junior English option). Of those students 52 were Black (roughly 14%) and 17 self-identified as being of two or more races. For this same year, a total of 197 students chose to take AP Literature, the senior English option. Of those students only 21 were Black (roughly 10%), and there were eight students who identify as two or more races. Enrollment is generally lower in AP Literature than AP Language. The prevailing understanding of this decline in enrollment is that students believe colleges will only accept one AP English class credit.

Since most freshmen year classes are detracked, the school created a pathway for the students to receive honors credit for their work. In English classes, the pathway to honors procedure is as follows: "Honors credit is awarded after each semester and based upon a student's performance on the summative assessments. To earn honors credit, students must earn an average of 80% on summative assessments for both quarters. Additionally, students must earn a C or higher for the semester" (English Department Honors Procedure, 2021). It is important to note that this language is included in all freshman and sophomore English class course expectations. The language specifically states that the assessments are "designed to prepare students for Advanced Placements options in History and English" (English Department Honors Procedure, 2021).

This research is taking place during a global pandemic which has significantly impacted student learning and student course selections. For example, at my research site, for Black and African American students in the 2019-2020 school year, 127 Black students took an AP exam

compared to only 78 Black students in 2020-2021. This was a 40% decrease in students taking

AP exams compared to the 2018-2019 pre-pandemic school year, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

AP Data for Black and African-American Students at Research Site for 2011-2021

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Total AP Students	99	131	136	146	159	159	132	128	127	78
AP Students with 3+	34	45	55	52	50	65	65	54	67	26
Pct of AP Students with 3+	34%	34%	40%	35%	31%	41%	49%	42%	53%	33%

Note: Retrieved from "Board of Education AP Report Feb 21 2022" by P. Bavis. (2022).

Due to this sizable decrease, for the purposes of reflecting a "normal" school year, I will defer to

data from the 2018-2019 school year.

My research site is a diverse suburban high school that prioritizes social justice practices.

While their demographics indicate that the school setting is diverse, the AP classes are not

reflective of these percentages. Certain subjects such as science, history and English are

detracked freshman and sophomore year until AP classes are offered for upperclassmen. Since

these courses are detracked, students have the opportunity to see the full spectrum of races,

genders and ability groups in their classes; however, once the course selection process for junior

year begins, so do the racialized sorting processes.

There are a few different components that are taken into consideration when students

decide to take an AP English class as this research site: teacher recommendation, counselor

recommendation, student input and at times, parent input. Though a negative teacher

recommendation nor a negative counselor recommendation can preclude a student from taking

an AP class, some students defer to these measures more than others. In my work with Black students, they are more likely to feel encouraged or discouraged by the educators counseling them. If the educators do not believe in them, it impacts their self-efficacy; whereas, White students are more likely to differ to their parents' for course selection recommendations and feel more comfortable overriding the educators' recommendations.

The outcome of these sorting practices is that the AP classes are racially segregated spaces in the school. When describing racially inequitable sorting practices in diverse school settings, Tatum writes, "Because Black children are much more likely to be in the lower track than in the honors track in racially mixed schools, such apparent sorting along racial lines sends a message about what it means to be Black (Tatum, 2017, p.136). Table 2 from the research site's 2022 School Board report reflects the disparity of Black students' access and success in AP classes at this school.

Table 2

Student Access and Success 2007 – 2019
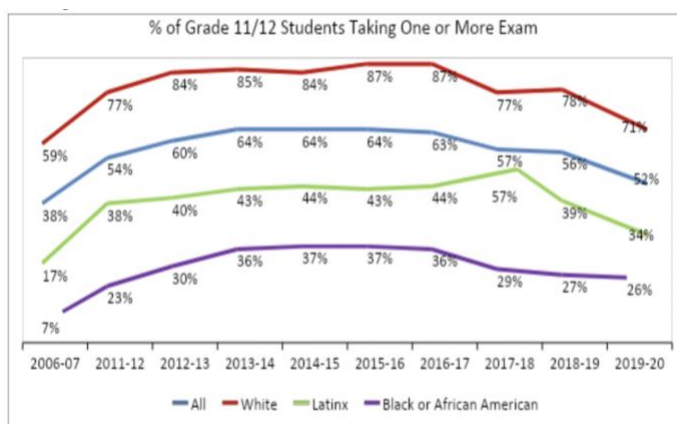
Note: Retrieved from "Board of Education AP Report Feb 21, 2022" by P. Bavis. (2022).

During the 2018-2019 school year, roughly half the junior and senior classes (52%) took one or more AP exam; however, of that 52% only 27% were Black or African American while 78% were White. For example, in my 2021-2022 AP Literature class, of the 26 students in my class, only two students identified as Black. These statistics reveal the existing racial disparity in AP English classes which makes being Black in this course a particularly unique experience.

Although the AP enrollment is racially predictable, the school maintains that it is a district-wide priority to eradicate this issue. To hold themselves accountable, their first district goal in their strategic plan is to "increase each student's academic and functional trajectory to realize college/career readiness and independence. Recognizing that racism is the most devastating factor contributing to the diminished achievement of students, [the school] will strive to eliminate the predictability of academic achievement based upon race" (Advanced Placement Board Report, 2022). Naming educational equity for college readiness as a goal in the strategic plan elevates these issues from a hope to an actionable item with accountability.

In attempting to achieve racial equity, the school strongly advices students to take AP courses, sighting financial benefits and building academic confidence as the two main reasons for taking the courses. In conjunction with a local university, the high school conducted their own longitudinal research to see how taking AP classes college persistence through at least five semesters. The data revealed that regardless of demographic group, their alumni, were more likely to persist through college if they took an AP class (School Board Report on AP Memorandum, 2022)

Table 3

AP Students' Post High School Success

AP Test Taking:
The percentage of students who persist in post secondary levels off around taking 3 or 4 AP tests.

To consider at earlier grades:
- Are students prepared to take AP courses?
  - Do they have access?
  - Do they have opportunity?
  - Do they have knowledge?
- What factors in 6th–9th grades predict AP test-taking?
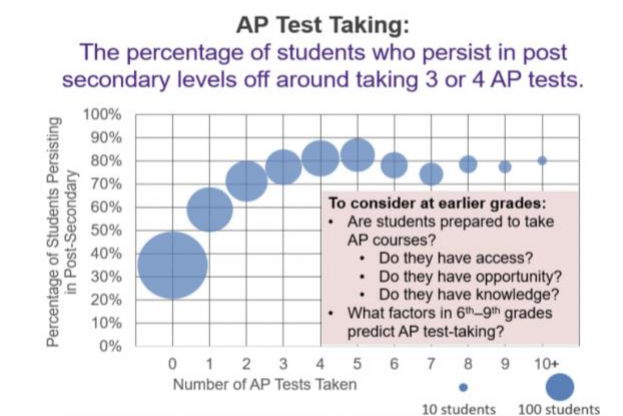
Note: Retrieved from "School Board Report on AP Memorandum Feb 7, 2022" by P. Bavis. (2022).

In 2015, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner signed into law The College and Career Success for All Students Act (Public Act 099-0358) which ensures that students who takes an AP Exam and scores a 3 or higher will receive course credit toward their college degree completion (https://www.ibhe.org/placement.html, 2022). In this high school, 25% of graduates choose to attend public colleges or universities in Illinois; therefore, taking AP exams and earning a 3 or higher can potentially lead to large tuition savings from AP credits (School Board Report on AP Memorandum, 2022).

Within the building, teachers question if the goal of guiding students toward AP classes and their exams is truly in the best interest of students. During the 2021-2022 school year, the administration has responded to the teachers' equivocation stating that "the school expects the teachers to support positive messaging around AP exams, reminders about the requirement to take the AP exam, and supportive preparation toward success on the AP exam for every student" (Bavis, e-mail 2.22.2022).

This research took place within the English department at a diverse suburban high school. In the department, there are 37 teachers and of those 37, 27 self-identify as white, five identify as Black, three identify as Asian and two identify as bi-racial (Black and White). Of these teachers, there are 13 who teach either AP Literature or AP Language. Only two AP teachers are Black and they teach the senior level AP class. No Black teachers teach AP Language and Composition.

Research Sample

In this study, I interviewed seven Black AP English students, and used strategic sampling to design my sample. The sample was inclusive of multiple genders to add to the scholarship focused on the Black male and female experiences. In terms of the selection process, I selected participants through purposeful sampling to provide "context-rich and detailed accounts" of these specific participants in this location (Ravich & Carl, 2021, p. 81). I recruited the students by speaking to them and sending an email to the students in a club for minoritized students in AP classes. The sample came from a population of students who are used to sharing their experiences in AP classes because they participate in the support group (Creswell, 2014). This club is a support network for students of color and young women in AP classes at the research site, though anyone can attend the meetings. These students are keenly aware of Black students' experiences in AP English classes because that is their lived experience. The group members are students in grades 9 -12 who are enrolled in or are interested in AP classes at the high school. The sample was only 11th and12th graders because 9th and 10th graders cannot take AP English classes. The study was open to students enrolled in both AP Language & Composition and AP Literature & Composition because I am also interested in how curriculum plays a role in the student experience. The study of language and literature can have a profound effect on a

student's view of themselves and of the world. Researcher Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) speaks to the power of the written word when she says,

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (para. 1)

While this is not a quantitative study and I was not searching for correlations, I was curious about the Black students' experiences in an advanced study of non-fiction texts (AP Language) as well their experiences during advanced literature studies (AP Literature). Did they read texts that affirm their critical sense of self? If so, what were those texts and how could we replicate those moments? Or did they read texts that reinforced stereotyping and spirit-murdering? If that was the case, what could educators do to revise the policies and procedures for curriculum development? Studying this population allowed for a deep exploration of the curriculum and other issues through the students' eyes.

Ethical Considerations

While this study posed no serious ethical problems, it was important to anticipate various ethical considerations, especially since the participants are from a vulnerable population, like children. Before conducting the study, I obtained permission from the research site and my department chairperson to conduct the research and select participants. As a part of the

dissertation process, I sought IRB approval since my study involved human participants. I ensured that none of the sample participants were my students so that the participants were not impacted by the inherent student-teacher power dynamic that exists in school. I purposely selected a research question that would give voice to traditionally marginalized students in schools. During the interviews, I tried to cultivate a celebratory tone to acknowledge their achievements and search for moments of joy amid a variety of experiences. When I selected the students, I provided the students with the informed consent form that included information about me, the study, a guarantee of confidentiality, and "assurance that the participants can withdraw at any time" in addition to other essential elements (Creswell, 2014, p. 96). Assuring confidentiality was critical for students since they share a negative experiences about teachers who are my colleagues. I also provided the students with the purpose of the study, the research question, and the sub-questions; however, I let them know that the interviews were going to be semi-structured to allow for follow-up questions. I received parental permission for participants who were not 18.

Once the interviews began, I built trust with the students by sharing my experience as an AP teacher, a former AP student, and an affinity group leader. Still, I was careful to not let my experiences influence my data collection or analysis. I crafted my questions to not lead the participants toward a specific answer (Creswell, 2014). The goal was to maintain openness during the data collection phase to allow the students to answer the questions in authentic and meaningful ways. It is important to note that this open and authentic approach revealed sensitive information and recalling racialized memories elicited some emotional responses.

When analyzing the data, I was be honest and objective in order to create a broader knowledge base around the phenomenon. I did not withhold any critical findings or results from

the interviews because it is dishonest and because each individual's reality was vital to making

meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Lastly, I maintained the participants' privacy and

anonymity, given that we are all members of the same community and did not want their

identities associated with the information they shared.

Data Collection Methods

In this study, I collected the data in three phases, beginning with individual journal

entries from each participant, progressing to semi-structured interviews that I recorded and

transcribe and ending with analyzing the College Board's official Course and Exam Description

(CED) for both AP English classes. I administered the journal entries to understand the students'

education history related to advanced learning opportunities in elementary and middle school.

Research indicates that one of the factors related to Black student success in AP classes is early

preparation (College Board, 2008). Educators need to proactively identify Black students with

advanced capabilities in preschool and elementary school and develop the skills necessary for

academic and social success in AP classes (Whiting & Ford, 2009). These elicited documents

(the journal entries) provided an artifact that told the story of the students' experiences which fit

with one of the goals of the study – valuing student voice. While the interviews provided a

similar opportunity, the students had several days to complete the journal entry, thus allowing

them more time to reflect on their experience and craft their responses in a thoughtful manner. I

encouraged them to talk to their parents when writing their journal entry to help understand what

might have happened that they did not know or did not remember. Reviewing these documents

allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' values and beliefs (Bloomberg & Volpe,

2019).

Once I gathered the students' journal responses, I scheduled the interviews. According to Ravitch and Carl (2019), in a semi-structured interview, "The researcher uses the interview instrument to organize and guide the interview but can also include specific, tailored follow-up questions within and across interviews" (p. 134). This was the best format for this study because it allowed me to engage in a formal interview while having flexibility within that structure. Bailey (2018) advises researchers to "think of a semi-structured interview guide as a living document rather than a static entity" (p. 107).

I constructed my interview questions using Gholdy Muhammad's (2020) Cultivating Genius Framework. Within her framework, she challenges traditional teacher evaluation frameworks by creating four unique categories on which a teacher's lessons should be measured: skill, identity, criticality, and intellectualism. I created questions within each of those categories so that the students could evaluate their experiences through this equity framework. In using this framework, my goal was to amplify culturally responsive education.

Since I was drawing upon phenomenology, I only interviewed students once or twice, and using a semi-structured interview format allowed the participants to include ideas and themes which represented their lived experiences, even if I did not specifically mention that topic. The interviews were about 45 minutes – one hour. This style and length of time also created a small, but meaningful inversion of power in which I might start the conversation, but the participant guided the trajectory. I included a variety of questions including those about the participants' background/demographics, experiences, behavior, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. I ended the interview by asking the students to make recommendations for the course content and structure for the following school year so that could help to improve the

course for future students. They were able to see that their lived experiences have power and meaning.

I collected their interview data in the students' natural setting, at their school, where they attend AP classes. Since I have my own classroom, I used that space as it has a comfortable homey feeling. The private setting allowed students to be more vulnerable and honest in their responses. My first choice of data collection was in-person at the students' high school because, as Creswell (2014) suggests, "qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where the participants experience the issue or problem under study" (p. 185). Being at the school could help students to recall school-related experiences. There were two participants who needed to schedule their interviews during summer, after the school year had ended; therefore, those interviews were conducted on a secure Zoom call from the student's home.

I chose to interview students for this study because, in a phenomenological interview, students were able to reflect and reconstruct their AP English class experiences in a meaningful way. We also had the benefit of interviewing at the end of the school year when the participants had a complete school years' worth of experiences in the course. Interviewing allows the researcher to understand the participants' experiences through their own words and emotions. Seidman (2009) notes that "The goal of researchers' using a phenomenological approach to interviewing would be to come as close as possible to understanding the true "is" of our participants' experience from their subjective point of view" (p. 18). As I strived to understand their experiences, drawing on the phenomenological interview process provided me with the structure to achieve the layers of description that I needed to analyze their experiences. In Seidman's (2009) synthesis of phenomenology, he suggests that there are four themes in this research method: The temporal and transitory nature of the human experience, subjective

understanding of an experience, lived experience as the foundation of phenomena, and the emphasis on meaning and meaning in context. I used these themes to guide my interview questions to ensure that I could truly capture what it means to be a Black student in an AP English classroom.

As the key research instrument, I drew upon Seidman's three-part method of analysis as this is a popular method of phenomenological interviewing to interview the seven participants (Merriam and Grenier, 2019). I used elements of Seidman's structure to ask questions that connected with the themes of his suggested interview series. According to Seidman (2009), the interviews should have had the following focus: (1) understand the participants' context, (2) the participant will explain and reconstruct their lived experiences related to the phenomena, and (3) the participants will assign meaning to those experiences in context. In creating my questions, I was particularly concerned with the participants' meanings of their experiences while also honoring the emergent design inherent to qualitative research as I collected the interview responses.

The first set of questions were background questions which helped me to understand the participants' context. In the background questions, the students explained their social identity, their relationship with their teacher and their relationships with their classmates. The skills, identity, criticality and intellectualism questions based on Muhammad's (2020) Cultivating Genius Framework addressed the second part of Siedman's model: explaining and reconstructing lived experiences. Through this section of questions, the students helped me to understand their experiences as a Black student in their AP English classes. The third and final section of questions asks the participants to reflect on their experiences by creating recommendations to sustain or improve conditions in the AP English classroom. These questions corresponded with

the third part of Siedman's model, meaning-making. This final section empowered students think of their ideal circumstances and create suggestions for their ideal AP class. Gained perspective from their experiences that can provide recommendations for aspects of their classes that they would like to change and aspects that they would like to replicate.

I have also used Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) to structure the questions in a way that allowed the participants to move from lower to high order thinking questions throughout the interview. The background questions were questions that asked the students to recall or remember facts about themselves and of their classroom context – Bloom's first level. The questions in the second section of the interview asked the participants to analyze and evaluate their contexts. The final set of questions asked the students to use Bloom's highest level to create and synthesize their thoughts by asking students to evaluate and prioritize certain elements of the course. These questions moved students from recalling and interpreting to creating lasting changes in the school's advanced placement classes.

In phase three of my data collection, I reviewed and analyzed some "official documents" from the college board. I analyzed the AP Course and Exam Description (CED) for AP Literature and AP Language on The College Board website as an example of the administrators' view of the course (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p.152). These documents helped me to understand the organizational structure and the pedagogical intentions behind the course. The CED is essentially a curriculum guide for the course that outlines key elements such as the course framework, suggested units of study, critical skills for each unit, and suggested texts. Lastly, I gathered data from the school-approved AP Literature and AP Language syllabi as a representation of teachers' expectations for the student's experience. I reviewed and analyzed this data in order to understand the context in which the participants experience their education.

Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis in this study occurred during and after data collection, meaning that I analyzed the data from the first participant's interview as soon as the interview was over instead of waiting until the interviews were complete. This allowed me to have a clear picture of each person's experience without being influenced by the preceding interview. Creswell (2014) describes the need to "winnow" the data as important because it helps the researcher to focus on the most relevant part of the data. Since I used a semi-structured interview format, I used this process of winnowing the data by organizing and distilling the data into themes. I reviewed the data for general themes, but I also reviewed it through a phenomenological lens. This approach suggests I look for how the participants' experiences have guided their "actions and interactions" in the AP English classroom (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I also described and interpreted the specific phenomenon of being Black in an AP Literature class as revealed from the interviews and journal data, not from prior assumptions. In phenomenological research, data analysis is "an attempt to highlight 'significant statements' that provide understanding and insight with regard to how participants experience the phenomenon" (Bloomberg & Volpe). Moustakas (1994) calls this process "horizontalization." I also included member checking, or a process for the students to be able to review my interpretations to ensure that I have captured the essence of their individual experiences.

As I collected the data from interviews, I organized it in a way that pared down the data to the most usable parts and allowed for extrapolation and pattern exploration, from the specific to general (Creswell, 2014). I coded anything that seemed relevant to discussions about race, themes that surprised or remind me of information that I collected in the literature review, and information that was repeated. Since this was a phenomenological study, I analyzed any

"significant statements," generated "meaning units," and developed "essence descriptions" (Creswell, 2014, p.196). My goal was to understand the underlying patterns of Black students' success and Black experiences in the AP English classroom; These factors revealed themselves during the data collection phase.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the validity of the research, and researchers can ensure this by examining the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the data (Lincoln & Guba,1985). To ensure credibility, I clarified and monitored my professional and social biases through journaling. As an employee of the research site, I have an in-depth knowledge of the factors contributing to the students' experience, but I did not allow that to minimize their lived experiences. In maintaining a focus on the essence of their experiences, I presented all accounts, even those that did not cohere with the other participants. Presenting discrepant data was essential because it spoke to the diversity of one's individual experiences.

To achieve dependability, I ensured that my research processes and procedures were transparent. "Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of data over time" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 204). By drawing on phenomenology, this specific methodology allowed me to understand the students' direct experiences (Johnson & Parry, 2019). Phenomenology also allowed me to engage in the bracketing process so that I may name my own biases and assumptions at the beginning of the study. Johnson and Parry (2019) remind their readers that "The process of bracketing provides researchers with multiple opportunities to name and monitor their assumptions, biases, and relationships with a phenomenon" (p. 106). While this process can be complicated, it is essential to ensure validity. I used triangulation and post-intentionality

methods in order to create a clear picture of the Black students' experiences in AP English classrooms. Drawing on post-intentional phenomenology enabled me to discuss the Black student experience in AP classes as well as the racial and social cultural power dynamics that exist in the classes. Being successful in this approach required that I viewed their experiences as complex and contextually situated. I achieved these research goals by collecting and organizing my pertinent statistical data, artifacts, notes, reflexive journals, and writings to interpret the phenomenon.

In qualitative research, the goal is not to be objective or to make the research generalizable as with qualitative research. Instead, qualitative researchers strive for confirmability, meaning that they want to ensure that the data is representative of the participants' ideas rather than the researcher's biases. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) remind researchers that "A goal of confirmability is to acknowledge and explore the ways that our biases and prejudices impact our interpretations of data, and address those through reflexivity, dialogic engagement, and reflexive discourse" (p. 205). I used triangulation and member checks as two strategies to ensure confirmability. I also used my researcher journals as a means to continually engage in reflection and reflexivity in my data collection and analysis. Lastly, I explored how the research site and the participant sample contributed to the inferences that I made about the data.

While the goal of this study was to understand participants' experiences, the result are not generalizable. Generalizability is usually reserved for quantitative studies. Instead, I strived to use thick descriptions in addition to multiple data sources in order to come to a deeper understanding of the Black students' experience. In my findings, used the student's voices to enhance or rethink the AP literature curriculum, policies, and procedures. The findings

contributed to recommendations while maintaining that the students' experiences were individual experiences with unique findings.

To further ensure validity, I attempted to have data triangulation by collecting students' journal entries and interviewing the students, thus collecting their lived-experiences as representative of the student perspective. Then I collected data from The College Board's Course and Exam Description resource on The College Board's website as a representation of the administrator's perspective for the scope and sequence of the student experience. Lastly, I collected data from the teachers' syllabi which represented the teachers' expectations for the students' perspectives. Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) remind researchers that "qualitative researchers triangulate by making use of multiple and different sources and methods" (p. 43). Each course is like a piece of a puzzle that creates a holistic account of the Black student experience. In the end, I collected enough information to create a thick description of the Black AP student experience that will not necessarily be generalizable, but might be transferable to other Black students' experiences.

Limitations

All studies have limitations and constraints that may affect the data collection and findings. While the interviews and journal entries provided insight into the participants' lived experiences, responses to interview questions were filtered through the participants' views and biases. These self-reported data might be inaccurate or even exaggerated versions of the actual events. The fact that I am an educator at the school might influence how students respond to the questions, and could bias their responses during the interview (Creswell, 2014). The small sample size, seven participants, also provided a limited view of this phenomenon. Although the goal was not generalizability, having more participants could have allowed for more

confirmation of patterns within their experiences. In terms of the artifacts in the study, The College Board website documents and the school's syllabi could be construed as contrived documents that were created to appear as equitable but might not be as equitable in their actual implementation. In other words, the documents might have provided me with the idealized version of the course rather than a true reflection of what students will experience each day.

Delimitations

My intention in this study was to understand the essence of the Black student experience in AP English classes. My ontological assumptions in this qualitative study were that the participants' experiences were subjective; therefore, my focus was not on having a large sample. I chose to focus on AP English as opposed to any of the other AP course offerings available at the school. Black students' experiences could differ in other content areas. The sample is composed of Black male and female students as opposed to students of color in general. I could have included other marginalized students of color like students who identify as Latinx; however, their experiences in an AP English class could differ greatly because of other socio-cultural factors such as the advantages or disadvantages of being bilingual or colorism. I also drew upon elements of phenomenology instead of using this methodology in its purest form.

Summary

The quest for understanding is at the heart of what I do as a humanities teacher. I teach students to look at the convergence of history and the human experience and how that influences or produces art. When I think about why I came a teacher, or even what my individual purpose is within my profession, I know that my purpose extends beyond what I can teach my students and is rooted in what my students can teach me. My constructivist and transformative worldviews empower me to see inequalities in our society and know that the state of inequality is

temporary as long as those who are oppressed want to change it. The strength in Freire's approach to combatting oppression was in his ability to get to know his students' experiences in order to connect with them. Once he was able to create that connection, they were primed for learning and for seeking lasting change within their society. My goal is that through my research, I will be able to help motivate and empower students to be successful, active, and empathetic people in our country. I also hope that my work will galvanize my colleagues and I to fight for more anti-racist educational approaches in the AP classroom.

Chapter IV: Findings

Foundations for Academic Success

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black students in AP English classes in a diverse suburban high school. Understanding the students' lived experiences could ameliorate the often harmful Advanced Placement classroom culture and curriculum barriers as educators continually strive for equity in advanced classes. This chapter presents the findings from two semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the seven Black high school juniors and seniors who recently took an AP English course. It also includes notes from written journal entries that they submitted, exploring their journey to enrolling in Advanced Placement courses. I have included information from the College Board's Course and Exam Description (CED), which is an artifact provided to all AP teachers for their specific course. It outlines the central skills for the course, suggested units, and sample lessons.

The findings in chapter four represent findings focused on the foundational elements in students' lives that led them to take AP English and achieve academic success. In this chapter I will explore their path to AP, highlighting their formative academic experiences that led them to enroll in the course. This will be followed by an exploration of their academic experiences with (or without) a teacher who employed culturally responsive teaching and culturally responsive pedagogy in their classroom. The final section of this findings chapter focuses on the curricular choices that the teachers made relative to the course texts and assessments. Ultimately, this chapter is about choice - the choices that the students made and the choices that the teachers made according to the participants in this study. All findings presented served to answer the following research question and sub-question for this study: How do Black students in a diverse

suburban school describe their educational experiences in AP English classes? How do Black AP English students describe their sense of academic success?

Theme 1: The Path to Advanced Placement

The participants noted multiple preliminary educational experiences that encouraged to enroll in an AP class. Here I will explore some of their academic experiences in elementary and middle school to see how those experiences shaped their enrollment in AP English.

Early Childhood Educational Experiences

Participants noted that they were exposed to early gifted or advanced learning opportunities which helped to create a scholarly identity and gave them the confidence to continue taking advanced classes. They enjoyed the complexities of being seen as a model student or exceptional in comparison to peers, though at times, school felt stressful. Charlotte recounts her experience in the following way, "In elementary school, throughout the majority of my career, I was in TAG (Talented and Gifted). In these classes, we would work on activities from all subjects and do a deep dive into different topics." While most students described their experiences positively with teachers who recognized their early potential, Maxwell's experiences were unique from his peers. Although Maxwell's first (and only) language is English, when his family moved from Nigeria, his elementary school put him into English as a Second Language classes. He said that his parents did not know how to advocate for him, so he stayed in the program for three years. However, the benefit of being in the program is that he had smaller class sizes and learned more foundational elements of the English language. Maxwell emphasized that "even though it wasn't an advanced class, it was a space that allowed me to catch up and set a better foundation in English which led to me doing better in future English classes. These ESL experiences inspired me to gain more confidence in speaking and just communicating with

others." By middle school, he felt that he could read and comprehend texts better than his other monolingual peers because he had so much individualized instruction early in his education.

One would like to believe that a student's early education would be replete with nurturing experiences, but students felt the sting of competition as early as third grade. Penelope reported that her school purposefully cultivated a competitive culture because their scores were tied to funding. She said that the administration and teachers made students keenly aware of the fact that if they earned poor test scores, they would lose funding.

> This made it a very competitive environment. I remember I was very shy in elementary school and didn't want to cause a lot of trouble, and that I was seen as the perfect student. I did my assignments on time and listened to the teachers, and I think I got preferential treatment because of my obedience. Specifically, I remember whenever the teachers would scold the class (which happened often), they would say 'oh but not you' or use me as a model for how to behave. I know that doesn't seem like something to complain about, but it did put a lot of pressure on me to succeed and be seen as this perfect student.

Most of the participants noted a very early connection between student performance and self-worth which might have contributed to the competitive school culture that they experienced in elementary school. Penelope notes very early signs of academic superiority in her peers associated with performance when she said,

> When students would compare answers after tests, there was an obvious sense of superiority in students that consistently got better grades, and that attitude was felt by students that weren't doing so well. Not to mention, these students would make up excuses to justify poor grades to maintain their superiority.

Penelope mentioned that this atmosphere was harshly competitive and the students viewed each

other as "opponents that needed to compete to establish their intelligence." Charlotte's

recollection of her early learning experiences was similar; however, she added that so much of

the hyper-competitiveness grew from the student's desire to please the teacher.

> In regards to equity, 'smarter' students were usually treated better than their peers. 'Not
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> smart' students wouldn't be treated badly, but 'smarter' students were more likely to be
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> called on, have their work displayed more often, to be chosen to do favors for the teacher
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> (like bringing their mail to the front office), and receive praise from teachers.

Many other participants also noted the importance of their relationship with their teachers. Some

participants recalled fond memories of nurturing teachers who they wanted to please while others

recalled stressful memories of teachers who tied grades to a student's personal value.

The participants had a wide range of early childhood experiences that prepared them both

academically and socially for Advanced Placement classes. If the school did not offer advanced

classes or if the school did not recognize the student as being prepared for advanced work, the

parents would supplement their education with additional classes and tutors after school and on

the weekends. The participants felt that the expectations of academic excellence were clear from

elementary school through middle school which primed them for advanced coursework in high

school.

Reasons for Taking AP English Classes

The participants shared a variety of reasons for taking an AP English course. Two

participants noted that their sophomore English teachers and their counselors played an

important role in their decision to enroll in an AP class. Although students can take AP classes

without a teacher or counselor's recommendations, Charlotte and Stella said that it felt good knowing that their teacher believed that they were capable of advanced-level work.

Of the seven participants, five said that they took an AP English course because it was the highest level of English offered in the school and they wanted to challenge themselves academically. Some of those students like Charlotte, Penelope, and Stella wanted to be challenged specifically in English while other participants just wanted rigorous coursework across the board.

In addition to academic reasons for taking the course, Kayla and Penelope noted social reasons, too. For Kayla, who tends to be easily distracted in class, she felt like the AP courses provided a more subdued learning environment in which she would have a better chance of success. She also felt that the general education courses were too easy for her. Penelope, who wanted academically rigorous coursework, said that she also took her junior-level AP course because of social pressure; many of her friends were taking the course, so she enrolled, too.

Once the students began the course, the first quarter proved to be challenging because while thought they would be capable of doing the work, the expectations were far beyond what they had ever experienced before. Since the high school detracked English classes in 9th and 10th grade, their junior-level AP English class was the first advanced course in this content area. This meant that in order to achieve success in class, the students needed to adapt to new academic expectations and a new social environment.

Theme 2: Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Education

In recounting their experiences in AP English related to how they achieved academic success, the participants' interviews revealed that direct and early skill-building coupled with intentional relationship-building efforts helped the participants to feel successful in the course. In

terms of skill building, Jillian, Kayla, and Charlotte said that specific skill building focused on rhetorical analysis early in the semester was beneficial to their academic outcomes later in the course. Charlotte said, "I think the most important skill is analyzing rhetorical devices and understanding how they're used and how they like affect writing." Penelope agreed with her peers and added that learning the art of rhetoric was important to her success and she felt the skill had applications far beyond the classroom. Penelope said the following:

> I think learning those devices, and learning how to use them, has made me a very, very good writer, especially doing it in junior year and going into college application season. We had to write a lot of reflections, and [in college applications] you have to write a lot of emails or a lot of like basically appeals like - Please accept me here! You need to know rhetorical structure to do that, because you're going to need to use certain elements and use certain like beautiful language…like you're appealing to someone.

Though they did not enjoy the process, Charlotte and Penelope agreed that early and repetitive skill-building also increased their confidence. They both shared that they had to write in-class essays (ICE) every two weeks as a part of their skill-building. Penelope confessed that she found the process annoying, yet extraordinarily helpful in her development as a thinker and writer.

In addition to becoming better critical thinkers, the participants also concluded that frequent ICEs increased their writing speed which gave them more confidence for the AP exam. Charlotte said, "I think this is going to be controversial, but I think the practice essays are actually very important. Without the practice essays, I would not have passed the tests. They're annoying, but they're really, really helpful. I will say that." In Stella's class, she said that her teacher also did a lot of direct instruction early in class toward increasing their analysis skills; however, her teacher encouraged them to make real-world connections.

While Penelope and Charlotte felt like they were learning their skills without any context or connection to social issues. Stella recounts,

> ...one thing he stressed in our writing was that when you read something and you see it for what it is in the book, but also try to connect it to real world. Like take it in for more than just what the author is saying, don't just stop at this is what he meant. We should try to find the bigger picture; he was always stressing the bigger picture.

Students whose teachers did not do as much direct instruction toward skill building felt as though they were not as prepared for the class, nor the exam. Maxwell said that his teacher focused more on speaking and listening skills as opposed to writing. Therefore, he did not feel prepared for the AP exam. He recalled,

> I feel like we should have prepared for the AP test. I feel like we didn't prepare until late in the year and that kind of forced me to cram a little bit. Like throughout the year, we did in-class essays once or twice on a computer. I feel like if we did a lot more analysis consistently throughout the year, like prep for each section of the test, I feel like that would be a lot better.

While the participants had reluctance about the workload early in the courses, upon reflection, students agreed that having clear, direct, and repetitive skill-building helped them to build confidence in their ability to succeed academically.

Student-Teacher Relationships: Academic Support Systems

The participants confirmed that one of the foundational elements for academic success was the ability to cultivate a positive working relationship with the teacher. Even when they were able to seek academic support from other teachers or school-wide resource centers, the participants still acknowledged that having a supportive teacher was the best resource. The

participants said that teachers could build sustainable relationships with students by (a) Giving clear and honest feedback, (b) Being anti-racist, (c) Using culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching practices (d) Praising positive behaviors that the students demonstrate.

By the middle of the first quarter, the participants noted that the course felt challenging and many of them needed academic support to ask for clarity, revise papers, or for general support in the course. The participants named teacher feedback, peer support, and outside teacher support as their primary academic resources in AP English. The participants were divided in terms of whether or not they felt like they saw their teacher as open to helping them in the course. Jillian, Nikki, and Maxwell felt like their teacher was approachable and would give helpful and timely feedback. When reflecting on her teacher's feedback cycle, Nikki said,

> He was always available for AM Support [office hours] even after school. And one thing I really liked was that he's not like one of those teachers that just read your assignment grades and gives it back to you know, he puts thoughtful comments, and some of them was like, oh my God, really? but it was necessary like he actually read your paper and sometimes he would just find simple grammar mistakes or punctuation mistakes, and he would just mark it and like, show you how to correct it.

While those participants felt like their teachers supported them, others did not have the same experience. Penelope, Charlotte, and Kayla felt as though they could not see their teacher for academic support, yet, they all cited different reasons. Penelope and Charlotte chose not to seek academic support from their teacher for fear of judgment from a White teacher. Charlotte painfully described the unwelcomed shameful feelings she had when needing to ask for help from her teacher.

Sometimes, there's this feeling of judgment from White teachers that students feel

whether it's like, implicitly or explicitly or both, but it's like, it's more scary to reach out

to a White teacher to edit my essay than it is to ask a Black teacher to do it, and I have

been asking White people to edit my essays throughout my life because I've always been

around them.

Penelope's accounts of her experiences mirrored Charlotte's in that she was also afraid to ask her

teacher for help - though her fear stemmed from the teacher's recalcitrant viewpoints rather than

a fear of judgment. Penelope explained, "I was kind of afraid to ask because she's like really

adamant about her viewpoints and all that. So, it's kind of like, I didn't know if what I was saying

was incorrect, because I didn't agree with her or if it was incorrect, because I actually didn't

know what I read." In Penelope's case, she was not afraid of the teacher seeing her as stupid, she

was afraid that the teacher would condemn her for having a different viewpoint than the

teacher's.

Charlotte was quick to say that Black students should feel comfortable receiving feedback from

teachers of all racial groups; however, she firmly believed that receiving feedback (she used the

word "criticism") from a Black teacher would feel better.

She said,

But I do think that students would find more comfort in getting criticism from teachers

that look like them. And not to mention some of the criticism that teachers give or White

teachers give can be like, coated with like, not even coated, but like it has like an

undertone of like, condescension, I don't even know if that's the right word, but being

condescending.

Penelope echoed this apprehension when she said,

> It was hard for me to want to connect with her. Yeah, it was really hard to make those
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> connections and especially because of the repeated micro-aggressions. It's not that I was
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> afraid, but it was just like, I don't know I didn't want to put myself in a situation where I
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> asked a question and like, I'm treated like, like a dummy or something.

When other participants felt the same as Penelope, often, their questions went unanswered which

proved to be detrimental to their learning. However, in more positive instances, students sought

academic support from other teachers with whom they had a better relationship. Stella and Kayla

felt that their teachers were approachable, but when their teachers tried to explain the content to

them, it did not make sense.

Like Kayla and Stella, Nikki also went to other teachers for help. However, she

specifically chose her teacher based on the teacher's race. Nikki said that she went back to her

English teacher from freshman year because she felt comfortable with her. One of the reasons

why she felt more comfortable, according to Nikki, was that her teacher was of Indian descent, a

non-White identity. Stella felt strongly about finding a Black teacher to support her through her

AP English class; however, she had not had a Black teacher in her previous English classes, so

after meeting a Black English teacher through a school organization, she started to go to her for

academic help. Stella recounts,

> I felt comfortable with her, and I felt like she understood most parts of where I'm coming
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> from. I don't have to like spill everything out like what I'm struggling with–like why
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> can't I do something. It was just much, much easier to communicate with her rather than
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> my teacher.

Since most students felt as though they did not have any friends in their AP classes, only Penelope mentioned that she sought academic support from friends. However, Penelope's friend was not in the same class period, but they had the same teacher.

Aside from going directly to a teacher or a friend, Maxwell, and Jillian used larger school-wide resources for academic support. Maxwell said that if his teacher was not available, he would go to the Academic Study Center, a resource room in the school which is staffed by teachers during their free periods. Jillian said that when she needed help, she preferred to go to the Literacy Lab. The Literacy Lab is a space designated to help students to strengthen their literacy skills. As Jillian explained her rationale for attending the Literacy Lab, she often looked down, and it seemed as though she was apologizing for not going to her teacher. She even blamed herself for their tenuous relationship when she said,

> Sometimes it felt like I wasn't getting the answer that I needed. And I don't know maybe it's just me because I just like have a hard time telling people what I want. Like especially like correcting people. I just like, I have a hard time doing that. And so I could go to my teacher for help, but I felt like I wasn't getting what I wanted. So then went to the literacy lab. And that did help. But I don't know maybe it just didn't feel comfortable.

Jillian was so nervous about approaching her teacher that even when she missed two weeks from school because of frequent seizures, she did not tell her teacher that she needed help or an extension for the assignments. When I asked why she did not tell her teacher that critical information, she explained that she did not want her teacher to think that she was trying to avoid doing her work; she did not want her teacher to think poorly of her. This feeling of shame and lack of self-advocacy was consistent with the other participants. They all feared that any misstep

(which included merely seeking clarification) would corroborate many negative stereotypes about Black students.

Anti-Racist Pedagogy: A Foundation for Trusting Relationships

The participants explained that in their experiences, it was easier to seek support from teachers that they trusted and with whom they built relationships. If the teachers made the students feel incompetent or if the teacher did not demonstrate that they believed that the participant could be successful, the student would seek help from other resources. The participants shared that it was easier to build relationships with White teachers who they felt were anti-racist. Charlotte spoke very passionately about the need for teachers to continually evolve their practice with the goal of becoming anti-racist.

> The most important advice I can give to a teacher is to educate yourself on racism and anti-racism and how not only racism has affected the history of America but also how it's affected the history of [our city] because if you don't understand racism, and you don't understand how to be anti-racist, then you can't call out the behavior that perpetuates racism. And that is the opposite of anti-racism. That perpetuates racism, specifically for Black students because we have a high Black population and Hispanic students. I feel they should know the history of all of like these people in our school, but like obviously, you can't know everything about each like race, but to just know what racism is, is so essential to being able to call out that behavior in class.

Penelope agreed with the opinion that Charlotte shared and said that while she did not experience having an anti-racist teacher in her AP English class, she felt the warmth of that experience in her AP US History class. When I asked her what made her feel different in that class, she said that her history teacher was "more comfortable addressing race and he was more comfortable

talking about it. And my English teacher really was not. So when you would bring it up, she would just kind of go, Huh? And then move on, which is not so helpful." Students definitely felt the difference between teachers who were culturally competent from those who were still uncomfortable acknowledging race. The participants interpreted that discomfort as a barrier to building a relationship with the teacher.

While Penelope and Charlotte agreed that their teachers could have done more individual research to learn and internalize anti-racist practices, Nikki and Kayla felt that their teachers were farther along on their anti-racist journeys. The teacher displayed more comfort addressing racism, and they interpreted their teachers' behavior as being more approachable. They both felt like their teachers verbally acknowledged them when they made a positive contribution to the class. Their teachers' encouragement helped them to feel seen and appreciated as Nikki demonstrates in the following anecdote:

> He pulled me aside, and he was like - thank you so much for being engaged in class today. I really liked how you went into discussions, and I'll never forget that conversation. Because it makes a difference like when you feel like you could be doing more or when you just don't feel like you're doing your best and then someone congratulates you for doing something good. It's it makes you want to keep on going.

Nikki said that moment made her feel uplifted, creating an indelible memory for her; however, since her teacher took the time to comment when students participated, he was also keenly attuned to when students were not participating. This created opportunities for him to show care and compassion when a student seemed sad or angry. Both Nikki and Kayla said that their teachers were adept at checking in with students. Kayla said, "My teacher actually acknowledges when you're trying, acknowledges when something is wrong, and acknowledges if you're

participating all the time and all of a sudden one day, you're just really quiet." These occurrences were particularly meaningful to Kayla because she began the school year feeling like her teacher was unapproachable because she did not understand his teaching style and was struggling academically; however, once she saw that each day he made an effort to get to know her and he demonstrated that he cared about her education and her well-being, she felt more comfortable going to him for academic help. Nikki said that she really liked his post-it note approach. It was a subtle way of showing he cared. She recalled the following story:

> I remember one time I wasn't really feeling well, I wasn't that engaged. And like I said, I'm always engaged in his class. And he kind of came over, sat by me, and wrote a post-it note. He was like, 'I noticed you aren't ok - I noticed something is up. Do you want to talk about it? Check one - Yes, No, Mind Your Business.' I think it was just, I don't know. I really liked that experience. It was like different even though I checked 'mind your business.' It was still just cool, and I didn't feel like he was my teacher in that sense. I just felt like he was someone who just noticed something was wrong and was just checking up on me.

The above comment underscores a general sentiment that all of the participants shared. They strongly believed that in order for students to achieve academic success in an AP class, teachers need to make an effort to get to know their students - especially in the fast-paced, competitive, and stressful Advanced Placement environment. Penelope very poignantly stated that relationships are the key to academic success when she said,

> I think getting to know your students - that's one of the most important things. I feel like often, if you have a teacher who doesn't really understand you or make an effort to

connect with you, it makes it so much harder to be in that class. It makes it so much

harder to engage which you really need to do to succeed in an AP class.

In this section, students have shared that teachers' dedication to skill-building and building

rapport with individual students early in the school year can help create the necessary

communication pathways between the teachers and students. Students shared that when the

teacher has clear skills-based instruction early in the year, it feels like the teacher is leveling the

playing field. The students were less intimidated by their White peers. When they did have

questions about the content, and the teachers were welcoming and openly receptive to questions,

students left the class feeling a sense of belonging and a sense of self-efficacy. Whereas, when

teachers took more of a sink or swim approach - meaning, students felt unsupported by complex

content, the students stopped believing that they could connect with the teacher or that they could

achieve academic success in the class.

Curricular Erasure and Representation

In this theme, we will explore the participants' experiences with the curricular choices

that their teachers made. Their responses were complex and layered - some participants longed

for new stories about Black experiences while others were grateful for the opportunity to read a

text by a Black author. The participants noted that while teachers tried to include works by Black

authors, often those works were steeped in violence, or the Black characters were self-loathing.

The positive aspects of Black history and culture were erased by the dominant culture, school

curriculum, or the teachers' choices. Texts from and about people of color were centered on

conflict and struggle related to Eurocentrism as opposed to any of the beauty and contributions

of Black culture. The teachers' curricular choices, what is included and excluded from the

curriculum, and the participants' opinions on those choices.

Charlotte lamented about the fact that in her AP English class, when students learned about other BIPOC cultures, it was "from the context of conflict" which, according to Charlotte, provided a myopic view of that culture. For example, she said that the only curricular text about an aspect of the Black experience was Frederick Douglass's slave narrative. She was frustrated by her White peers' responses to the text because their responses revealed an insular worldview. Charlotte questioned their response when she said,

> I think for the majority of the book, it talks about like, how slavery is bad, it's damaging to the Black family, to the Black individual, to their body, to their mind, like all of these things. But I don't think my peers knew to the extent that it was and Frederick Douglass goes into that a lot in the book, and I bet they were surprised like I know some of them actually, verbally said, I did not know this happened during slavery.

Charlotte reveals her dismay with her peers in this statement. Penelope shares this frustration, but with a slightly different perspective. Instead of focusing on her peers' responses to the text, she questioned why Douglass' work was the only work by a Black author in her class. While participants understood the importance of sharing Dougalss's story with this generation of students, when they reflected on Black voices in the course curriculum, they said that the BIPOC stories in the curriculum were focused on pain narratives and oppression. In her class, the multi-faceted complexities of Black experiences were reduced to stories of suffering and pain. Penelope asserts these beliefs when she says,

> Black people are in perpetual suffering, and nothing good ever happens to us. And we should always talk about the bad stuff. Yeah, which I think is valid. There is a lot of stuff that does need to be addressed. But you know, it's not like nothing good ever happens to us, right? Yeah, there's some really cool and really interesting things that come out of

that. It's always focused on kind of like the conditions that got us there, not how we got

out.

Penelope and Charlotte were not the only ones who felt this dismay over having "Blackness"

reduced to slavery and oppression. Jillian agreed with this perspective. When reflecting on her

experiences with these texts, she said, "like all the books that we've read kind of had Black

people in a sad light." She suggested that the experience would have been better if her teacher

had explored systemic racism instead of the pain and trauma of slavery, that is, focus on the

antecedents of slavery and the systems in place that made Douglass have to survive being

enslaved, instead of the perpetual violence against Black bodies.

Jillian reiterated how difficult it is to complete an assignment when it is steeped in racism

when she said, "it's kind of hard to take like a creative look on things when the story is so sad,

especially with a book about being Black." Despite these feelings, all of the participants agree

that they rather read stories by Black authors and deal with some level of discomfort than not

experience any Black voices at all; however, later in this report, they use their voices to provide

recommendations on how teachers can improve the ways in which they integrate literature by

Black authors or about Black experiences.

To avoid these culturally insensitive moments, Penelope and Charlotte felt as though

their teachers only passively included literature from Black authors without any intention of

exploring deeper issues such as culture, race, and power. Those teachers focused on skill

building and did not progress toward building knowledge about these larger hegemonic systems.

While Penelope felt like this approach inhibited her racial identity development in the course,

when reflecting on her experience reading *The Bluest Eye*, she said, "If we're reading *The Bluest

Eye*, why are we analyzing the use of the color yellow…the whole time? We can talk about the

color yellow, that's fine, but the whole time?" Penelope felt that there was a glaring missed opportunity to analyze larger themes related to race while reading *The Bluest Eye*. When discussing Pecola, who felt ugly, with exasperation, Penelope said,

> Instead of being like, what are the standards that lead into this? The conversation was - 'oh my gosh, you should love herself' which is like, Yeah, I mean, yes, that's great. I believe so as well. But how did Pecola get to this place of hating her appearance? Right? Let's talk about colorism and proximity to Whiteness... But we didn't really get to have those kinds of deep conversations in that class.

Penelope said that since the English class did not engage in critical conversations about race, power, and culture, once they left class and went to their AP US History class, they would debrief about English class in history class. Due to the structure of the course, all of the students in Penelope's AP English Language class were in the same AP US History class. Penelope previously mentioned that her history teacher was more adept at facilitating conversations about race, so that class became the space for them to restore and explore discourse about Black peoples' contributions to American society.

Charlotte did not feel like her cursory reading of Douglass and Morrison's detracted from her development, it just did not enhance it. Charlotte said, "I don't think she like inhibited my racial development. But I don't think she really pushed for it. Reading literature with Black characters in class is not pushing for racial equity or anti-racist behavior - that's just reading." Charlotte, Maxwell, Kayla, and Stella said that other assignments like the junior research project and independent reading allowed students to choose topics and authors that lead to identity development. When reflecting on the junior research paper, Stella said, "It eventually like helped me learn more about like, my identity in like different spaces, but no specific assignment was

like, geared towards that. I kind of made it that myself." When the participants felt like their experience was not being represented in the curriculum, they found ways to create those experiences for themselves. When they felt like their teacher was not capable of facilitating a conversation about race, they continued their conversations outside of the classroom. Though they found ways to make even the most difficult situations feel slightly better, they were left wondering why the only texts about Black people or by Black authors were either focused on being enslaved or on self-loathing. Stella shared the following thoughts:

> Um, I think she tried talking about current events and current racial events. She tried by like, reading *The Bluest Eye*. I don't know if that was a mandatory book, though. I am, like, constantly putting out work that was like, centered about race and justice and all that stuff. But as far as like Black joy, that wasn't really represented overall, but like, it was always in a negative light, which I didn't always appreciate. Yeah, but it's better than nothing.

Participants shared that even when the texts were negative in nature, if they were written by or included Black characters, the participants were more invested in the story and did better on the assessments.

Although Penelope, Charlotte, and Jillian were upset about the texts that their teachers chose, some participants found comfort in simply reading texts by Black authors. This comfort engaged them as learners. Participants like Stella and Kayla noted how much they appreciated reading *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. Stella was beaming as she recalled Morrisons' text, she said,

> Reading *The Bluest Eye* was really nice for me. I love the author Toni Morrison! I like the way she described a lot of things, and it's a sad book, but it felt very familiar to me…

Here Stella illustrates the evaluative reader response that Stella had when reading the text. Kayla echoed this sentiment when she said

> I liked seeing things in the book that I feel in my life. Like if I didn't read that book, I wouldn't be aware of the things I am now. The main character in the book…she was just so like, she was blind to see like, how beautiful she was…And like, she was so convinced that if she drank milk, she would have White skin, and that she would have blue eyes and just be like the person like on the book cover that you would normally see. And I feel like I see that in a lot of people in the world like and they don't even know. Like wow, like you don't even know how beautiful you are, you know?

Here Kayla made a deep connection to the characters in the text while working on skills such as active, reading, close reading, and literary analysis. She identified with the insecurities that the characters felt and she made larger connections to the societal pressures for beauty and perfectionism. Ultimately, Kayla's connection to the plot and characters contributed her academic success in that unit. Charlotte makes a similar point when she said, "There are so many small anecdotes from the book that I was just like, this is my life. It's just that book really impacted me." These students clearly saw themselves in the literature and having these connections gave them a space in which they were engaged enough to clearly demonstrate mastery over the AP skills.

Some participants shared that they had affirming experiences that lead to academic success because of their teachers' curricular choices. These participants thrived academically when they read texts by Black authors not only because they were engaged, but because they had more context for the characters' experiences. Kayla shared that when reading *The Bluest Eye*, "it like it was about a Black girl, so like, I related to it more. So like I could, like bring my own

experiences into my writing and that was like what helped me a lot." Here Kayla shared that in connecting with the literature, it was easier for her to respond to the text in a meaningful way. When Maxwell was recalling a time when he felt celebrated, he said that when his class read, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the White students did not read the book in its entirety during the unit. He speculated that they did not read it because they did not feel connected to it. Since he had read the book and felt connected, he said that he was confident in his knowledge. As a result, the White students often asked him for help with the assignment, and he assumed a leadership role in the group for that unit.

While some students thrived, the participants' success seemed to be determined by the author's race and by whether the teacher used culturally responsive teaching techniques to craft their assessments. Students who had to do assignments they deemed racist struggled even when the text was by a Black author. When teachers created culturally insensitive assessments, these experiences had adverse effects on the Black students' academic and emotional growth.

Aggrandizing White Authors

Participants shared that despite the schools' access to texts by BIPOC authors or about BIPOC experiences, most of the texts that they read in class were still by White authors. Five out of the seven students briefly mentioned these texts revealing a disconnect between the reality of how they spent their time in class, and what they deemed as important in the curriculum. While reading *The Bluest Eye* or Frederick Douglass' memoir was only a unit amongst seven-nine units in an AP curriculum, the participants spent most of their interviews talking about their academic and emotional experiences during those short moments in the school year. However, when they spoke about the units in which the teachers chose to include White authors, they noted that these texts were treated with canonical reverence and a scholarly significance not afforded to

literature by Black authors. Texts by White authors were the norm, and texts by Black authors were the aberration.

While Stella and Penelope acknowledged that most of the texts that they read in the course were by White authors, what made their responses slightly different was that they spoke about their respective teachers' use of scholarly sources, not just literature. Penelope shared that she noticed that even the scholarly texts, in her words, the books that were about "how to be a good writer and how to read" were all written by White authors. The participants felt like it sent a message that White authors were the only ones who could be experts in the field.

When reflecting on the literature written by White authors, participants felt disconnected from the content and noted that they lost enthusiasm for the course when switching from a text written by a Black author to a text written by a White author. When they lost enthusiasm, their grades fell, too. Jillian described her experience with *The Great Gatsby* in the following way:

> Well, like, *The Great Gatsby*, was kind of just was like, I don't know rich, wealthy people who are like, had too much money for like their own good. While *The Bluest Eye* was kind of more relatable, and like more interesting.

Kayla and Stella relayed similar feelings about *The Great Gatsby*, about feeling like the content was frivolous in comparison to some of the deeper issues that they could have discussed in the Black texts. The participants also shared their frustration that although they felt like *The Great Gatsby* did not resonate with them, they noticed that their grades decreased. When Stella, Penelope, and Charlotte reflected on their experiences with *The Great Gatsby*, they questioned why it was so easy for their teacher to delve into the deeper issues of feminism and classism in those texts, but their teachers could not muster the same energy toward unpacking anti-blackness in other texts.

When the participants felt that a unit was not speaking about their identity, they seemed ambivalent toward it, and learning felt transactional - the participant did the work, and they earned a grade. When I asked the participants why they felt that their attitudes changed when reading texts by White authors, they said that they read texts by White authors all of the time. They came to the realization that with only two years left in high school, they wanted to study and enjoy Black literature in school, not just for independent reading; they wanted to see teachers include varied texts by Black authors into the standard curriculum. Charlotte shared this sentiment when she said,

> We learn about White American culture every day. Like it was in class discussions and during casual conversations when we weren't even learning - we were always learning about White culture. White culture is right outside that door. White American culture is everywhere.

When the student read texts that illuminated the Black experiences, particularly ones that were affirming, those units sparked interest, creativity, knowledge seeking, and identity development.

Curricular Violence through Assessments

While the students agreed that reading texts by Black authors was important, they felt that the assignments associated with those texts could be highly problematic and could cause barriers to their learning. Similar to how there are complex Black cultural conversations about watching police footage of the destruction of Black bodies, Jillian question her teachers' curricular choices because she felt like her White teacher and the White students were using Dougalss's book for entertainment. She said that her peers said that the text was "riveting" which made it seem like Douglass was not a real person and that the horrors that he endured were not real either. She said, "felt like it was like amusing for them."

Participants felt like in the pursuit of teaching literacy skills, teachers would trivialize violent and traumatic Black texts and Black experiences. Penelope recounted the first assignment for her AP Language class during which the students were asked to analyze the rhetorical structure of newspaper articles about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's deaths. Penelope said that the teacher did not acknowledge the content of the articles, meaning the racism, violence, and tragedy that these victims and their families experienced. Penelope said, "And so it was very difficult, you know, especially coming out of a lot of political and racial unrest." Penelope said that when her teacher created assignments related to race, the assignments continued to be representative of a dehumanizing experience for the Black individuals in the story. "During that assignment, it seemed like it was making a spectacle of a real event that really happened to someone. It wasn't really like addressing like, that is a real person who was killed." Penelope admitted that early skill-building is important, but if skill-building was the goal, the teacher should have chosen a less controversial topic. She contended that choosing different content would have been a more inclusive way to begin the school year.

Some participants said that their worst experience was when the teacher assigned a summative assessment for the Frederick Douglass unit. For this assignment, the students needed to write a letter to a slave owner trying to convince him of why slavery is wrong. The letter was to be written from the perspective of someone who the slave owner would respect. Penelope's initial objection to this assignment was, "Why would I want to be someone who a slave owner would respect?" She felt like there was no purpose in assuming that persona. Her second objection was that she felt that she had to, "erase who I was to complete that assignment." In the previous section, I discussed erasing the nuanced stories and contributions of Black people in America. What the participants described was needing to compartmentalize their identity as a

Black person as separate from their identity as a student. Their experience suggests when a teacher gave an assessment that they deemed as racist, they were forced to suppress their Black identity to be academically successful. Penelope went on to say,

> Like I had to put aside everything about me every ounce in me to be like, *Oh, I hold you in high regard* to write any kind of rhetorical structure that seems like I respect this man. I had to, I don't know, I guess like pretend I wasn't Black for a moment. It was really, really hard to write. It was really hard. I'm not gonna lie.

Another objection to this assignment was, "Why should I have an assignment that asks me to justify my humanity, the humanity of my people?" Jillian echoed a similar sentiment when she recalled being assigned the same assessment. She felt disappointed that the school would allow the teacher to give such an assignment. She said, "It was really upsetting to be in an environment that claims to have so much diversity and be so supportive of Black people, but then assign assignments to write to a slaveholder." Both Jillian and Penelope said that they eventually completed the assignment despite their objections to their teacher's curricular choice. They both avoided the assignment until the last minute and wrote something that they admitted was not their best work. Penelope said that despite earning an A on the letter, she had a mental block against completing it.

While Penelope was able to endure this assignment and still earn an A, some participants like Stella said that these kinds of experiences inhibit her ability to learn. When recalling a group assignment about the character Cholly from *The Bluest Eye*, Stella felt that,

> My rights as a student were taken away from me, and I had to become a teacher in a sense, because they weren't getting it and the teacher couldn't explain it. And it was like,

and I was the only Black person in that circle. So I felt like I had to like overly explain how generational trauma affects people and why this happened.

Instead of focusing on building her own skills during the assignment, she said that she felt the burden of trying to explain racism to her White peers. She did not see this experience as empowering or as a moment for leadership like Maxwell did in his experience with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Instead, she saw this moment as an example of the teacher's ambivalence toward racial issues. Stella regretted that the onus of teaching was on her when she said, "I feel like I had to explain basically everything that they didn't get in the book because I was the only Black student." She blamed the teacher for the frustration that she endured. Stella said, "I think the teacher could have been more aware of who's actually in her classroom, rather than just pulling things she's done in past years." Here Stella suggests that the teacher reuses lessons and does not consider her current students' racial identities.

Penelope also repudiates notions that lessons can assume a one-size-fits-all structure.

They asked us to analyze something that was very, very personal to my history, and my history as descended from slaves as well in, like a removed way. We had to analyze it for rhetorical structure or for color themes or for motifs, and things like that, but you're like hey, wait a minute, but there's racism in the content, and we're not going to talk about that at all.

Penelope said that she was so deeply impacted by these negative experiences with her assignments that although she earned an A in the junior-level AP Language and loves English class content, she refused to sign up for the senior-level AP Literature class. She said that she did not want to risk having the same teacher who would make the same culturally insensitive curricular choices for the curriculum and assessments.

Curricular Joy and Black Contributions

Although most participants did not like reading about Black trauma, Nikki found the experience affirming, therefore, she excelled during these units. She agreed with her teachers' curricular choices because they provided a space of unity; her class could collectively agree that racism is wrong. Nikki said, "I was really happy because despite their color, everyone knew it was just wrong for a human to be treated like this - [we're all] like the same blood, same bodily organs like all that." Instead of focusing on the trauma that the person or character endured, Nikki chose to focus on the racial advancements that American society had made from the 19th century through now. She also said that reading texts like Frederick Douglass' gave her a window into how White people saw African Americans in the 19th century. She saw the text as a learning opportunity because her family had recently emigrated from Western Africa and she could learn more about American history.

Jillian, on the other hand, emphasized her desire to see more stories about Black joy and Black cultural contributions in the curriculum for herself, but she also shows concern that her White peers will leave school with a myopic view of what it means to be Black. Participants thought that based on the curricular choices, Blackness in the AP English classroom was synonymous with misery and struggle. Participants also explored the tension between wanting to be seen as strong while also wanting her White peers to feel like Black people are vulnerable, too.

The female participants in the study each said that they wanted more opportunities to associate their identity with positivity - they wanted to experience Black joy through their assignments. Rejecting the idea that all Black experiences are steeped in trauma and sadness,

Jillian shared that she wanted to read more literature about a variety of Black experiences - particularly ones in which Black people are allowed to be happy.

> I just wish we could read a story with Black people where it's like, happy or like, there's joy, or there's, like, drama that goes on. Not like pain and misery and like, you know, I wish there was just like a good it just gives I feel like it gives people this weird image of like strong and we're all strong, and we're all like resilient and what not and that we can't be can't be defeated.

The participants said that the Junior research paper was a curricular choice that allowed students to research a wide range of topics including the positive contributions that Black people made in American society. When Penelope studied the Pullman movement for her junior research project, she was able to make a personal family connection to the movement that she found out about when she interviewed her grandmother. She said that it enhanced her understanding of her Black identity and the long history of contributions that African Americans have made to the United States. She shared, "that connection allowed me to kind of see like, it's really important to know, not only the history of what goes on behind a place, or what's behind any kind of context, but also the people involved in it." Overall, the participants had a positive academic experience with the junior research paper because they learned more about their racial identity and they were able to share what they learned with the class. They achieved academic success on this assignment by earning some of their highest grades for the year.

Summary

In this findings chapter, I sorted and analyzed data related to the academic experiences and subsequent choices that students made on their path to AP English. I also explored the pedagogical and curricular choices that the teachers made and how those choices impacted

students' academic success. I reviewed the participants' perspectives on their teachers'

pedagogical practices as well as how teachers integrated texts by Black authors or about Black

individuals into their curriculum. The next findings chapter is centered on belonging and the

emotional implications of the curricular choices from this chapter.

Chapter V: Findings

Social-Emotional Experience and Student Voices in Response

The previous section began with an exploration of students' educational experiences and the subsequent choices that they made for their academic careers. It progressed into exploring the teachers' curricular choices in the AP English class and the participants' thoughts on those choices. In the latter half of chapter IV, I specifically focused on the curricular choices, that is, specific texts and specific assessments, related to the participants' academic outcomes. In this findings chapter, instead of focusing on specific assignments and academic experiences, I will focus on participants' socio-emotional well-being with a boarder look at the classroom culture through their classroom discussions and interpersonal interactions. As opposed to academic success, this chapter is about belonging and the moments that lead to or inhibited the participants' sense of belonging. I will explore how the students felt during peer interactions, teacher-to-student interactions, and the overall classroom culture. This chapter will end with a demonstration of participants' power and agency through their recommendations for ways to reenvision the course. All findings that I presented answer the following research question and sub-question for this study: How do Black students in a diverse suburban school describe their educational experiences in AP English classes? How do Black AP English students describe their sense of belonging in this unique, seemingly diverse context?

Theme 3: The Specter of Race and a Sense of Belonging

When the participants described their social-emotional experiences in AP English, they explored feelings of invisibility, isolation, silence, and fear. These emotions were the result of curricular erasure - curricula and educational practices that obfuscated the truth of African

Americans' contributions to American culture. Their social-emotional experiences were also shaped by how they interpreted their teachers' and peers' behavior toward them in the classroom.

Invisibility

Classroom discussions can be the sources of deeper connection or deeper stress for the participants in this study. Participants reported a range of painful experiences - some involved the teachers, while others involved their White peers. When they discussed their classroom discussion experiences, they meant large classroom discussions as opposed to smaller group work. Large group discussions seemed to evoke anxious feelings because the participants felt that it was a public declaration of knowledge that amplified one's feelings of dominance or fear in the classroom. These discussions seemed to leave them feeling either invisible or hypervisible when they just wanted to feel normal.

Most participants, five out of the seven, reported that their teachers used classroom discussions as the primary way to process a text. Charlotte, Penelope, and Stella reported that their teachers used a traditional question-answer discussion style which created a hierarchy that centered the teacher as the scholar with the White students who raised their hands often at the top of the student hierarchy. These participants felt that this discussion technique left it to the teacher to decide whose responses had value. This was demonstrated by how the teacher chose to respond to a question and how the teacher responded to their student's answers. Charlotte reported feeling dejected when her teacher called on her, interrupted her response, and quickly moved on to a White student. She said, "And then I felt like I was being devalued because I didn't get to finish what I was going to say. And now I just look like someone who's like, I don't know exactly what I looked like, but I just felt like what I was trying to say was not being appreciated and just being looked over." Charlotte felt that her teacher's apathy toward her

response depicted the teacher's feelings about herself as the sole authority during discussions which did not allow space for the students to explore their scholarly identities. The students were left feeling like they were invisible and like what they had to say was unimportant or unintelligent.

Penelope reported similar feelings when she chronicled her classroom discussion experiences. In her class, she felt that the teacher could never be wrong. "It's either the student is right, and she's right, or the student is wrong, and she's right. There can never be a point where she is wrong. If the student is right, like she just doesn't accept it." According to Penelope, her teachers did not want her students to disagree with her interpretation of the material. She applauded ideas that reflected her beliefs while ignoring or rejecting beliefs that countered hers. Charlotte felt that this teacher-centered approach stifled students' abilities to think about and learn from each other's ideas. It also perpetuates this idea that there is a distinctly correct answer, and that answer is whatever the teacher thinks. Charlotte wrote,

It feels like she is more receptive to answers that kind of agree with her already like preconceived notions. Which is like I understand to an extent but as a teacher, like your job here is to like in a sense, is to be a neutral party and to like, take these different sides and help like students, just help students learn from both or because like, one side could be objectively bad, but you can still learn from like, what is wrong about this side.

These kinds of experiences left the participants trying to guess what the teacher thinks rather than creating their own interpretation of the texts.

The participants also revealed that discussions about race were particularly challenging because White students often opted out of or redirected discussions about race. Charlotte shared that when reading texts about race, "Classmates were apathetic toward content which made it

difficult to have deep conversations." When I asked why she felt that her classmates were apathetic to the content she said, "I think the majority of my classmates in like that class don't actually do it for the content but do it rather for the credits because in AP you get one extra GPA point bonus or something." Charlotte and a few other participants noted that their White peers did not want to discuss race in the class, and this made them feel hurt; yet, they also felt deep discomfort when students did engage in conversations about race because there were so few Black students in the class to share in the discomfort with them. For example, when discussing *The Bluest Eye*, Stella revealed her frustration when she said,

> I really think that they're surprised when they learn about racism in our books or through what I share with them, which is surprising to me. Because it almost feels like they think of Black women as a caricature, or like something that's not fully real. Which is not something that like anyone wants to deal with when you're like one of three Black kids in the class.

Here Stella and her peers who responded similarly noted their surprise at what White people do not know about racism. Many participants echoed this sentiment about "Black women as a caricature" though it was not specific to women. Participants explained that their White peers contextualized the Black experience as a monolith, with subhuman and superhuman elements; however, Black people could never just be human with natural human emotions and experiences. The participants suggest that many of these misinterpretations could be interrupted by the teacher, but the teacher needs to feel confident in his/her/their ability to discuss race in the classroom. Two participants said that their teachers tried to avoid discussing race even when the text had a Black protagonist and overarching themes related to race. Charlotte shared that she tried to push her class to talk about race when it was relevant and when she could see that her

teacher was only going to focus on skills and not the themes. When this happened, her teacher tried to avoid racial conversations. Charlotte shared,

> So I'm going to talk about race when it's relevant. But I think the teacher got scared, and she just didn't do anything about it, which was really upsetting, but it wasn't surprising, because she's done that in the past when we've talked about things that are more deep. She kind of just like, went on to the next subject rather than dive deep or like, validate my concerns in that conversation.

Charlotte shared a common concern that her fellow participants also shared during their interviews - while White teachers can choose to be colorblind, Black students in AP classes do not have that option.

Though most of the participants shared unfortunate events that occurred during their classroom discussions, some participants found that their discussions were edifying and thought-provoking. Kayla shared that her class discussions, particularly about race, reminded her of how far our society has come from the sociocultural norms of Frederick Douglass's time. Nikki shared that her favorite moments in class were when the teacher facilitated conversations in class that were not grounded in literature, rather these were community-building conversations. She described one experience as follows, "we just had a great like discussion, it was full of laughter. We started talking about rats, and then everyone started telling stories about their encounters with rats, about middle school and elementary incidents. Everyone started talking. No one was on their phone." Nikki's enthusiasm and joy as she recalled this moment was infectious.

Some participants shared that their teachers were especially adept at drawing students into the conversations, especially the quiet students. Like Nikki, Kayla described the discussions as the best part of the class though her discussions were academic. She expressed that she

enjoyed them because she got to hear a variety of opinions about the texts because the teacher had a rule that everyone had to speak. She said, "some people even like the quiet ones, like they'll speak up about it and like, you'll hear things and be like, oh, I wasn't expecting that. And yeah, and like they noticed some of the same things that I noticed in the book." When I asked how he got the students to speak, she said that her teacher made the class engaging by telling jokes. When I asked how her teacher's jokes shaped the class culture, she shared that his jokes helped to release the tension in the class. Stella shared that her classroom's seating arrangement (a "U") helped to spark conversation because they were all facing one another.

More than half of the participants shared that either their teacher completely avoided class discussions about race or they stifled the discussions, resulting in superficial and desultory discussions as opposed to robust thought-provoking ones. Participants like Charlotte and Penelope reflected on their class discussions in which they would talk about a text with a Black protagonist, but they never discussed how the character's race shaped their experience. The students found this particularly difficult because AP Language is primarily a non-fiction course, so it was especially glaring to read an essay or speech by a Black author and ignore their Blackness. Charlotte provided an example during which her class was discussing injustice as a theme in a book. She said, "it wasn't like a conversation really. It was more just highlighting the themes in the book." She expressed a desire to have conversations about race despite the discomfort "it's going to be uncomfortable, but it is a conversation that needs to be had." Two participants felt that the unit felt incomplete without discussing race when race is clearly an issue in the text; however, they questioned if English class was the right place to have those discussions. One participant argued that perhaps those discussions should occur in AP US History "A-PUSH" because the AP English classes are so focused on rhetorical devices and

strategies. She genuinely seemed conflicted with the notion that AP English teachers should discuss larger critical issues. Another participant suggested that perhaps A PUSH is the better place for conversations about race because her history teacher just seemed more comfortable and skilled at facilitating conversations about race.

All of the participants noted the tension between being hypervisible and invisible as a Black student in the AP classroom. They revealed that this experience was especially difficult when they were studying texts related to slavery. Penelope revealed that her teacher had a habit of singling her out to participate when they were discussing slavery. Penelope and three other participants shared that they do not like the perception of needing to speak for her entire race, especially when the teacher is recounting one of the darkest times in American history. Two students shared that when their classes were having discussions about race, they deliberately refrained from speaking because they wanted to hear their White peers' perspectives. Regardless of whether or not they spoke, they still felt that the other students were staring at them, waiting for them to speak or react to the discussions in class. The participants shared that experiences like these contributed to them feeling "traumatized." Penelope shared, "I would say my experience and AP Lang was low key, for lack of a better word…it's kind of traumatizing. I'm not gonna lie. Um, I was one of very few Black students, and my teacher wasn't really good at, I don't know, picking up subtle cues." Participants felt that their teachers did not recognize or understand how to deal with the discomfort that Black students felt when they were discussing race. Instances like this made participants feel isolated, yet, there seemed to be Black students being isolated by other students versus self-isolating - isolating themselves from others.

Isolation

During the interviews, 6 out of 7 participants reported feeling isolated in their AP English class because of their race. They noted that they were either the only Black student or one out of two or three Black students in the class. While these numbers are similar to the demographics of their STEM classes, the participants felt like it was more difficult to be isolated in an AP English course because of the content. One participant noted that while the content in her AP Chemistry class was challenging and she might have felt isolated at first, she was soon able to move past those feelings because her racial identity was never a factor in her work. Kayla shared, "I just put my head down and did my work in my AP Chemistry class, but it was easier to do that because we never talked about race or had long class discussions." Participants shared that being isolated in AP English is a unique experience because some teachers want you to connect with each other, work in groups, discuss racial identity, and other introspective topics. The nature of the content makes being in an AP English class a more challenging experience for Black students.

These feelings of isolation manifested themselves socially and academically. For example, Penelope reported struggling to connect with the people in her class because it was a predominantly White class with students in what she deemed as fixed friend groups. When the participants spoke about feeling isolated and not having friends in class, they spoke with an assumption that friendships were determined by race. Therefore, when these Black participants were in their AP English classes, they saw the White students with friends, and they saw themselves as outsiders in the space. Penelope shared her experience this way, "I think as a Black student in AP Lang or AP Lit, you're kind of already not in great numbers around there. So, you don't have a lot of connections. And so, if you don't have a connection, even with your teacher, you don't have a connection with other students. And maybe your friends aren't taking

the class, then it gets really isolating really quick." Penelope highlights her loneliness and isolation from the students and her teacher.

Other participants shared similar insights and added that they felt that the onus was on them to try to connect with their White peers. If they did not make those overtures, they felt that they would continue to be alone. Charlotte shared that when she tried to connect, she had to defer to their culture. She shared, "They want you to connect with them and to know the elements of their culture…. like *The Bachelor* or something, but I don't watch *The Bachelor*. Charlotte shared that when she was in her AP English class, it felt like, "I was kind of ostracized, and I felt like I was kind of like alone on my own island. Jillian echoed this sentiment when she said that socializing in class was "really hard - we hardly ever talk." This isolation extended beyond the classroom in ways that impacted them academically, too. Participants reported that their peers would form study groups without them. Penelope said,

> It's very important to form study groups, and I don't like how sometimes they forget to think of you when they're making their study groups. They're like, oh, we have an exam coming up. Let's all study for this. Let's get everyone's number. I don't have any of these people's numbers, but they have each other's numbers because they've known each other before…or something like that.

The Black students knew that these study groups existed, but they were never asked to be a part of them. Students admitted that the study groups could have been formed based on preexisting peer relationships; however, if this was the case, they realized that it put them at a disadvantage because they did not have many friends in their classes. The participants also believed that on some level their peers did not want them in their study groups because their White peers did not see their Black peers as intellectuals. The participants believed that their White peers did not see

them as smart or worthy of being in the class which shaped how they interacted in class and contributed to the silence that they experienced.

Silence

The theme of silence was consistent amongst 100% of the participants; however, the silence manifested itself in a myriad of ways including the Black students opting out of discussions and choosing not to speak to their teacher even when they needed help. Students acknowledged that these choices negatively impacted their grades; however, due to the amount of school-related stress that they experienced, silence felt like a protective mechanism.

Six out of the seven participants said that they opted out of assignments and discussions related to race. Charlotte shared, "When we're talking about race and class, I don't think students of color should be prompted to talk. It makes me feel weird when we're talking about race and class, and a teacher is like, *so what do you think*?" The participants felt singled out as one of only a small number of students and would often choose not to participate. One participant shared that her silence during conversations about race stemmed from what she called, "White liberalism." Jillian stressed that the community prides itself on being "liberal" and they treat that liberalism as synonymous with anti-racism. Because of this philosophical misalignment, Jillian worried that if she shared how she really felt about something or called someone out for a racist comment, they would be even more offended than someone who was outwardly racist. Exhausted by the prospect of having to fight against her entire class, she remained silent. She shared that, "Being a White liberal, it's like their 'Get Out of Jail Free' card - like, they can't be racist. And so, it's just like those moments where you're like, you still want to call things out, but you can't." When I asked Jillian why she felt like she could not call out the racist behavior, she said, "it's like it's just the chance of being outnumbered and like, looked at crazily because they are the majority that

makes you want to not say anything." Her experience is consistent with her peers - the lack of diversity made these participants feel like others would not share or understand their points of view, so they remained silent.

The participants also shared that they did not speak very often in class because they were deeply afraid of being wrong. This fear eroded their self-confidence and self-efficacy, making it difficult to participate in small and large group discussions, and it even made them procrastinate on individual work. The participants attributed this fear to previous experiences in class in which the teachers or White peers ignored or humiliated them. The participants were all so afraid of being seen as less intelligent than their classmates and being unworthy of being in the class that it was easier to just not say anything. When I asked if they had ever thought of telling their teacher why they were not speaking, only one said that she had attempted to share her concerns with her teacher and it did not go well. Charlotte said that she tried to share her concerns about the racist undertones of an assignment, and the teacher became defensive. Her teacher felt that the participant was accusing her of being racist instead of hearing and responding to the student's discomfort with the assignment. The teacher's response lead to the student's continued silence.

One participant shared a positive outcome from his self-imposed silence. Maxwell recounted that in his class, they had graded discussions as summative assessments. Despite the fact that these discussions counted as a test grade, he still would not speak. Ironically, the fact that he knew that the stakes were slightly higher made him less likely to participate. He recalled,

Finally, I was like, okay, what's stopping you? I just sat down. I talked to myself, and I'd think to myself - Okay, what's stopping me from speaking? Why am I so anxious to speak? And like, Why do I feel this? I told myself like, okay, I'm nervous to speak

because I'm in a new space. So I'm in a new space, and I told myself Okay, I had to get

used to being in new spaces because in most colleges it is going to be just like that.

He reasoned that knowing he was eventually going to attend a predominantly White

institution in which the demographics might be similar to his class motivated him to try to get

used to speaking up even when he felt alone.

The participants share that Black students approach the class with fear while the White

students have the privilege of approaching the content with confidence, even if it is false

confidence. Maxwell shared that there were times when he wanted to speak, but he just felt like

he was paralyzed with fear. He shared, "Oh, I'm not comfortable speaking. I told my friends I

like oh my gosh, today. I don't know why I was so nervous to speak. I always tell my friends, but

I never would tell my teacher." Meanwhile, as Kayla shared that White students do not share the

same level of fear when she noted,

> you see a difference between the Black and White people in the class like, the Black
>
> people like they just don't want to talk as much. They have a feeling like they
>
> don't…that they shouldn't talk…like their voice, it doesn't matter. And then the White
>
> people feel like, feel like *this* in the class. [brushing dirt off her shoulder - a hand gesture
>
> to convey confidence]

The participants believed that their silence contributed to the misconception that they do not

belong in the class. Kayla shared that in her class,

> some Black students would begin to speak and stop themselves because they were so
>
> afraid of being wrong. [Black students] will speak up and say, Oh, nevermind. We're like
>
> yeah, like in the like in the writing. Like if you work with them, like oh, you actually do
>
> have things good things to say that you don't that I don't hear like in class.

The participants shared that there were three prevailing questions that stopped them from speaking: (a) What if the rest of the class does not agree with what I'm saying? (b) What if my comment does not sound as smart as everyone else's? (c) Am I saying something just to feel a sense of belonging?

The participants with stronger personalities saw fear as a hurdle that they could train themselves to scale as opposed to an immovable barrier. Charlotte and Stella shared that while they had moments of insecurity, they tried to own their identity as a strong Black woman which gave them the courage to share even when it was scary. According to Charlotte, her confidence during class discussions resulted in a " 'Oh, here she goes again,' because they don't want to hear about race or whatever else I was saying." Though she felt good about participating, it came at the cost of feeling as though she was speaking to a disinterested audience. The participants were disheartened because they felt that their voices did not matter in their class.

Fear

Throughout the interviews, the participants revealed that in an AP English class, the Black student experience is unique because White students have the privilege of being themselves while Black students feel forced to put on a facade to mask pressure, fears, and insecurities. Maxwell, Kayla, and Penelope reflected upon the pressure that they felt to either say something smart or not say anything at all. They often chose silence as I described in the previous section. Charlotte and Penelope felt confident in their abilities most days, but ironically, their scholarly identity also felt like a heavy burden because they felt that they had to display their intelligence all of the time or else their peers might begin to question their presence in the course. White students work from an assumption of being smart, and they might occasionally make a mistake. Their mistake is viewed as a temporary aberration as opposed to with Black

students, at best, they are seen as average and have to constantly prove their intelligence. They must constantly prove that they belong in the class. Any mistake that a Black student makes is evidence of a more permanent lack of intelligence - evidence that they do not belong. When Penelope shared this sentiment, she rubbed her forehead and looked exasperated from having to recall the feeling. She said,

> Feeling like a smart kid is just kind of overbearing sometimes because I've had White students in my class that are like, like, really smart and they're always talking at a high level because it's like a subject that they like, which is what I do in English, but sometimes it just gets like overbearing when you're just trying to like have a calm day.

The participants shared that for Black students in a majority White class, even one bad grade on an essay could change the class's perception of them, so they needed to be perfect. When Penelope recalled her experience, she said, "There's a lot of pressure involved in being a Black student in an AP class. I feel like you're expected to think a certain way, and you're expected to kind of have these certain views and act a certain way. It's really difficult, especially in a class where it's a largely White environment." The students feel limited in how they can behave, talk, or even think. Stella shared how she needed to "code switch" to fit into her class. While code-switching was a common experience, it was especially difficult for her to adjust her speech to sound like her White peers because of a medication that she was on for a neurological condition. Despite her limitations, she prioritized adapting her speech in class. On the days when it was too difficult to reduce her AAVE dialect, she simply would not speak. These feelings were tied to participants' fears about how they might be perceived by their teachers and classmates. Charlotte astutely described similar limitations when she said,

We [Black students] have like these character archetypes. I feel like White students can feel different every single day and have a different emotion or have a different personality every single day and it's just like, oh, that's just Brady. But if I were to come into class, not speaking out, or saying like silly jokes, like it would be like, it would be looked at differently.

Her account illustrates the idea that Black students exist under intense scrutiny. They have to function with the constant concern that their peers and teachers are judging them which creates a confining environment with unattainable standards. They described the paradox of needing to pretend like they earned A's all of the time because grades are important without making it seem like they are struggling to get A's because that might reveal that they are not smart and do not belong in the class. Meanwhile, the participants like Kayla generally felt that the White students were "just like used to it," meaning, they could easily fit into the classroom culture and expectations.

Charlotte painfully described her experience in class as feeling like a mime.

I feel like I have to play like a strategic role or else like everything's gonna fall apart and I don't know exactly what 'everything's gonna fall apart' means. But it's just I feel like I've been like pushed into this like mime box that I like, like tapping on the sides to get out of, and like, it's invisible. Like it's an invisible box, but it's like still there like I like, I feel like a mime kind of like, it feels like I can't really pinpoint who is telling me to play this role, but I know that it's there. And I'm like a mime stuck in this like, fake box or invisible box.

The participants described these expectations that guided their behavior and made them feel limited, but they could not attribute it to any single source. Sometimes the expectations came

from perceptions of what the teacher wanted, peer perceptions and at other times the expectations came from an inner voice, their own self-assessments, self-doubt, competitiveness, perfectionism, and fear of failure. Regardless of the source, the participants saw the ideal AP student as a swan gracefully swimming on a pond. It looks like they are effortlessly floating by, yet, their feet are moving vigorously underwater to propel them forward. Five of the seven students found it nearly impossible to maintain this image because it is an exhausting activity.

Unfortunately, Penelope and Kayla mentioned that this perception was reinforced by a certain bravado or confidence that White students had in the AP classroom. Penelope referred to it as "White superiority complex." She felt that her peers would assume an overconfident tone in class to make themselves seem smarter and to demean their Black classmates. She said, "it feels like not only are they making me feel like my race is like less, but it also makes me feel like their intelligence is more." She went on to say that this intimidating dynamic is fueled by both racism and classism. Participants shared that these experiences made it difficult to thrive academically and socially; it also contributed to Black students' low enrollment in these classes.

Though the self-doubt was debilitating for most students, some found a silver-lining to persevering through these circumstances. Maxwell was proud of himself for making it through the course in spite of these emotional barriers.

> I was anxious about being the only Black student in some of my classes, and I started to doubt my abilities sometimes. As time progressed in the class, I trusted myself more and found that I was just as good, if not better than my peers and I proved that with my success, all of these experiences have led to a newfound trust within myself and my improvement as a student.

Other participants echoed this sentiment; despite the difficulties in feeling a sense of belonging and navigating the academic demands, the immense satisfaction of completing the course gave them a sense of pride. This was true for all but two students. They said that the negative experiences vastly outweighed the positive experiences. Despite the fact that they did well in the course, Penelope earned an A, and Stella earned a B+, with so many senior elective English classes that would inherently attract Black students, they chose not to take AP Literature, the senior-level course. They shared that if the school could guarantee they would have a Black teacher and/or more Black students in their class, they would reconsider. They also liked the idea of taking the World and Ethnic Literature class because it would provide them with the opportunity to read literature from Black authors. They thought that it would also increase their chances of having a Black teacher.

The Joy of Belonging

While the participants were quick to share their negative experiences, they presented glimpses of positive experiences in which they felt joy, inclusivity, and an overall sense of belonging. Sometimes the anecdotes they shared seemed to juxtapose or contradict how they felt during their negative experiences, therefore illuminating the complexity of their feelings in the class. For example, while the participants deemed class discussions as a fairly hostile endeavor, participants like Charlotte and Nikki felt empowered by the opportunity to share their ideas and to teach their White peers about an aspect of their humanity or history. They felt this same kind of satisfaction when they had writing assignments in which they could explore the nature of injustice in the world. Charlotte recalled, "It's just we write about what we know about injustice, and then we put it in our essay, and then it's briefly discussed when we have like, conferences with our teacher, but it's not like something that is a main, like a big thing in our class." As she

shared, she seemed sad that they had not spent more time on assignments like this that provided them with the opportunity to develop their skills related to their intellect and criticality.

When I asked the students for specific moments when they felt uplifted in the classroom, they shared a range of experiences. The participants shared that some of their best academic moments were when they worked with other Black students in the class. Maxwell and Jillian said that they felt joyful and a sense of connection with other students when their teachers were intentional about making time to let them connect in non-academic situations. For example, Jillian shared that her teacher allowed them to ask each other anonymous questions as a community builder. Jillian recalled the activity this way:

> "So like we were able to write questions to anybody in the class anonymously. So like, if we like the classmate's shoes, we could write down - hey - where did you get your shoes? So this girl wrote to me, she was like, where did you get your braids done? And I told her that I did it myself. And then like she was like, they're really good, and like the whole class complimented my braids."

Nikki recalled that her teacher allowed them to talk to each other about their favorite show, so she realized that a classmate enjoyed the same series on Netflix. Though they were from different racial identities, and had never spoken before, according to Nikki, they still "built that connection." After that conversation, the student asked Nikki to be her revision partner, normally an anxiety-inducing event. Moments like these made the participants feel like they belonged in the class. Peer connections facilitated through teacher-led community building allowed students the opportunity to feel connected in the class.

Theme 4: Black Student Voices for Change - Envisioning a new AP Experience

During the interviews, the students shared a myriad of ways in which teachers can improve the experiences for Black students in AP classes. Overall, there was a sentiment that because the school has de-tracked many of the freshmen and sophomore classes, there is a jarring and abrupt demographic and cultural shift from the general education courses to Advanced Placement. At times, the participants had conflicting suggestions on how the schools could address this seismic shift.

Cultivating Academic Success and Confidence

When considering how to address the curriculum related to students' academic success, the participants explored several recommendations for ways that teachers can provide Black students with a more positive environment. The participants overwhelmingly believed that having clear and direct instruction early in the school year helps to bring academic equity to the classroom. They described classroom cultures in which some of the overconfident White students could pretend to know the skills while the Black and Brown students shrank in fear of embarrassment, wrongfully assuming that everyone else knew the content while they were lost in darkness. However, when teachers spend the early part of the first quarter reviewing skills and defining essential terms, participants such as Stella and Maxwell shared that this allowed them to access their prior knowledge about the content or learn it alongside their White peers without feeling that they were behind. Charlotte and Penelope hesitantly extolled the praises of frequent in-class essays. Penelope shared, "writing an in-class essay every other week helped me in my critical thinking, but it also helped me in my quickness like when I'm writing an essay for the AP exam, like it was so much easier because I knew how to do it because I had done it before." They shared this advice with apologies to their classmates, noting that their opinions

might be unpopular; however, they attributed their confidence and success on the AP exam to the fact that they had many opportunities to practice writing essays for the AP exam.

While skill-building was important to the participants, they also advocated for teachers to highlight Black authors' accomplishments to normalize Black scholarship. Participants noted that when teachers integrated supplemental texts about how to interpret literature or analyze rhetorical structures, while the literature might be from Black authors, those who write the "how to manuals" are always White. Participants, especially those interested in a profession in the arts like Stella, would like to see more supplemental texts from Black professors. Nikki shared that it would be encouraging to have her teacher share information about scholars of various ethnicities so that students of color can see positions to which they can aspire.

While some students desired more supplemental texts by Black authors, all of the participants craved literature by Black authors that allowed them to explore more nuanced Black experiences which were not necessarily centered on oppression. The participants wanted texts that explored Black joy, Black love, or even Black sci-fi - according to Penelope. Charlotte decried teachers' use of novels that seemed to normalize the abuse of Black bodies. The participants described in detail the difficulty of always being associated with sadness and oppression. When reflecting on the experiences of those who were enslaved, Charlotte said, "That's who we were, but that's not representative of who we are now." Penelope passionately explained, "There is beauty in Blackness - we just don't get to see it." Instead, the participants felt that they were inundated with negative historical images of what it means to be Black in America. Even when teachers were doing early skill building in August, participants like Charlotte described having to analyze a headline related to George Floyd's murder.

Charlotte and a few other participants felt that asking students to practice their skill-building in August on such an emotional text negated the humanity of George Floyd and ignores the innate emotional response that Black students would have to such a tragic story of racism in America. Penelope believed, "If the goal was to talk about rhetorical structure and to introduce some of the themes of the course, choose different headlines that don't have so much emotional impact for all of us. I can understand that she was trying to make it relevant, but there are relevant articles that use a rhetorical structure that are not about police brutality." The participants said that they want to see positive representations of the Black experience in America - especially if the teacher has the liberty to pull headlines from current national news headlines. When reading historical texts like Frederick Douglass's narrative, Charlotte shared that if teachers must teach texts about racism and brutality, Black students should have the opportunity to opt out of the conversation. She shared,

> Even if we're not delving into it just reading a book about slavery like Frederick Douglass. It's upsetting, and I don't want to have to talk about slavery and death, and like my people being slaughtered and abused and dehumanized like, I don't feel like discussing that today. Even though I might bring a new perspective or a more diverse perspective to the conversation. I feel like my emotions matter more than the conversation that we're having,

Stella shared the inequities she noticed in the curriculum as indicated by the texts that they read in class. White students get to read books like *The Great Gatsby*, which (according to Stella) is about being frivolous, rich, and White, while the Black students' example of Blackness was the experience of being enslaved or persecuted. The participants had come to accept that AP English courses are replete with texts that seem to speak to a White audience whether that is to

teach them about Black oppression or to serve as a mirror of White wealth and dominance. The Black participants felt the string of these choices so deeply that when I asked if they would take the next level of AP English, half of them said no because they did not want to continue feeling less than their White peers.

Cultivating a Sense of Belonging

It is important to acknowledge that there are several systemic issues that impact a student's experience in a class that are outside of a teacher's locus of control like sectioning, clustering, board-approved books, and hiring practices. However, as this research is focused on the student experience in the class, the participants provided their perspectives on how teachers, who are in direct and repeated contact with students, can amend their practices. The participants collectively felt that it is difficult to learn from a teacher to whom one does not feel connected and who does not try to foster a sense of belonging in the class. Participants shared the following ideas to help teachers to build connections with students and to help them to connect with each other early in the school year.

The participants believe that the first thing that teachers can do to ensure that Black students feel a sense of belonging and are academically successful is to educate themselves in anti-racist and culturally responsive pedagogy. Since all of the participants had White teachers for their AP English class, those who defined their experience as positive could not attribute it to a racial identity connection. Instead, they attributed it to the teacher's internalization of anti-racist professional development work either independently sought after or through the high school staff development meetings. Participants like Stella hope that when teachers learn about culture, race, and identity, they will be able to cultivate a welcoming atmosphere for all students, particularly their Black students. Stella explained,

Most of the White students in AP classes have been trained to be in AP classes since like, legit third grade. It's hard for Black students to feel welcome, and to be heard and to be understood. So I feel like a lot of the teachers need to be trained on how to talk to them, and how to maneuver around them to like, help them move in the class to where they feel safe. Because I do not feel safe 100% of the time in my AP classes, and I don't want anyone else to not feel safe.

Charlotte shared that becoming an anti-racist not only helps the teacher to reflect on his/her/their actions, but it could also help the teacher to start to understand the content that they teach in a different manner while providing them with the skills to facilitate conversations about race instead of shying away from them. As Charlotte advised, "You can take a lot from those books, but if you don't know how to, or if you don't even know what being anti-racist is or understand like the basics of the Black struggle, you're not going to take that from the book." The participants felt that teachers who have not done the work to understand their White identity nor their students' Black identities were doing them a disservice because there were so many topics that they did not discuss from the texts because their teachers were afraid or ill-equipped.

Participants like Charlotte also felt that teachers cannot adequately address racism and microaggressions in the classroom if they do not have the knowledge to identify them. She argued, " If teachers want their Black and other students of color to be comfortable in their class, they need to educate themselves on racism so that they can call it out." Participants who had teachers who were more adept at discussing race and identity felt that they left their course with a better understanding of their own identity, and they had more confidence in their Black scholarly identity.

Stella, Maxwell, Jillian, and Charlotte expressed that when creating seating charts or small group work, teachers should consciously group Black students with at least one other Black student. They felt that they could be more productive when they were seated with another Black student. Stella argued, "I get why teachers separate Black students - to create more diversity in the other groups. But letting them sit together in safe spaces does a lot more help than harm. Like that should be heard by more teachers." While Stella argued for grouping Black students together, Maxwell expressed concern for how not intentionally grouping students had impacted his Black classmate who was experiencing the AP environment for the first time. As a veteran AP student, he recounted a time when he spoke to another Black student in his class who was taking her first AP class. He lamented that she was struggling with her self-confidence. He had remembered feeling that way in the past and wished that the teacher had put them together so that he could have helped her sooner.

The participants felt that being grouped together could help build confidence and validate their unique experiences. Penelope shared the following: "I know it's AP Lang and Comp and we're there to learn the structures and the skills and all that kind of stuff, but I'd like to add more group assignments and more group discussion in these classes." Charlotte furthered Penelope's commentary on group discussions by saying that when students have discussions on the text, it needs to extend beyond the rhetorical devices that the authors employ and begin to address the meaning and cultural connections. She shared that "I still think that there's a discussion that can be had about the content as well going on because they're not just arguing like empty sentences that are very beautiful. They're arguing real words with meaning. And so, I think it's also important to discuss the meaning in order to understand why they're using the devices that they're using."

The participants challenged the notion that AP courses had to be solely defined as places where one must only work hard and be stressed. They claimed that throughout the school year, teachers should make a concerted effort to build a trusting relationship with their teacher and have the teacher facilitate trusting relationships between the students. Penelope expressed the following:

> I think getting to know your students is kind of one of the most important things. I feel like often, if you have a teacher who doesn't really understand you or makes an effort to connect with you, it makes it so much harder to be in that class. It makes it so much harder to engage and all those kinds of things which you really need to do to succeed in an AP class.

They suggested activities such as community builders, conferences with students, and more group work for the purpose of building a communal culture based on trust.

    However, they cautioned that teachers should cultivate trust and confidence through small group work, individual conferences, and office hours for debriefing. The participants shared that it is important to know that the teachers are available to ask clarifying questions or to discuss uncomfortable moments that occur in class. Penelope recalled, "I know it's hard for me to take that initiative and put myself out there and be like, Hey, I was uncomfortable, or I wasn't comfortable with this, or, Hey, I think we should talk about this that happened in the book. It's really hard to do that." Penelope and Charlotte shared that teachers should invite students to debrief with them because given the power differential between students and teachers, it is difficult for a high school student to feel immediately empowered to initiate these discussions. When cultivating a classroom in which Black students feel a sense of belonging, the participants suggested that teachers maintain a reflective and reflexive approach, allowing students the ability

to question, debate, and challenge the teachers' perspectives. The participants like Jillian, Kayla, and Charlotte fervently believed that teachers must practice actively listening to their Black students by affirming their experiences, asking follow-up questions, and making changes to the curriculum as the result of student feedback.

Listening to students and being responsive to their needs creates equity in a system that is already difficult for the students to navigate. Charlotte furthered Penelope's commentary on the importance of building a relationship with one's students when she addressed the isolation that Black students experience.

> As a Black student in AP Lang or AP Lit, you're kind of already not in great numbers around there, so you don't have a lot of connections. And so if you don't have a connection with your teacher, you don't have a connection with other students, and maybe your friends aren't taking the class, then it gets really isolating really quick. So, I think making the connection with your students is so important - to be like, Hey, I see you and I see what you're doing out here, and I am interested in your success…

The participants expressed that having a connection with their teacher could help mitigate the isolation that they feel when in an AP class. This feeling of isolation is particularly pronounced when the class is engaged in large group discussions and discussions about race. Discussions in general seem to be a hostile environment for Black students. The participants shared many different ideas on how to improve class discussions. When reflecting on how they have discussions, Charlotte and Maxwell shared that teachers should begin the school year with small group discussions before launching into large group discussions. Charlotte shared,

> I had so much anxiety because like off the bat, we went into like this big class discussion and the class was quiet, and you're kind of on the stage. So it can be a lot for some

people. And I was like, I felt it was a lot for me until I convinced myself or forced myself

to speak. But there's a lot of people who still may not be able to get over it. So I feel like

to like really do discussions, have a small group discussion first started with like tiny

steps, do it with like a partner. Do those small groups so you can like get more

comfortable speaking and then go to a big class. Just do small steps.

The participants valued the time at the beginning of the school year during which they could

build the skills and confidence to convey their ideas to the entire class. Allowing students to

practice how they can develop coherent ideas before needing to express them to a larger group

provides them with the opportunity to develop their ideas and expand their ideas with the help of

their small group.

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of Black students in AP

English classes at a diverse suburban high school. In this section, the participants shared their

varied accounts related to student belonging and their academic success while focusing on the

shared phenomenon of being one of a few Black students in their AP English class. My analysis

of their experiences revealed four themes related to my research questions and my sub-questions:

How do Black students in a diverse suburban school describe their educational experiences in

AP English class? How do Black AP English students describe their sense of academic success?

How do Black AP English students describe their sense of belonging in this unique, seemingly

diverse context? In the next chapter, I will continue to give voice to Black students' experiences

and elaborate on my interpretations while relating them to relevant research and literature in the

field. I will also discuss how the themes can be applied to other high school classes including,

but not limited to AP classes.

Summary

In this findings chapter, I analyzed data addressing how Black students in a diverse suburban school describe their educational experiences in AP English classes, and how they describe their sense of belonging in a diverse school setting. The presence and absence of belonging are fundamentally related to the students' racial identity and the experiences that they have because of their race. The participants revealed the hardships that they endured like invisibility, isolation, silence, and fear, while sharing how those experiences impacted them. They also shared the moments of social-emotional connection and joy that they felt with their teachers and peers. In the end, some of their most powerful commentaries came in the form of their vision for an AP English classroom in which Black students could experience academic success and a sense of belonging.

Chapter VI: Discussion

This section synthesizes and analyzes the data from the findings chapters while connecting them to existing literature and research in gifted education, ability grouping, tracking, identity development, and Advanced Placement. In this study, I sought to understand the experiences of Black AP students in a diverse high school. The goal of this study was to provide Black students with an opportunity to share their stories while also giving teachers, counselors, and administrators a window into their daily experiences. My synthesis and analysis of the data are firmly situated within a Critical Race Theory (CRT) theoretical framework, allowing for certain important assumptions, such as the fact that racism pervades all parts of American society, including the educational system (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Wing, 1997). CRT also reminds us that people in American society are positioned in relation to Whiteness (Carbado, 2011; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1989; Dixson & Rousseau, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

My hope is that, based on this research, educators will review, revise, and implement new policies and procedures to improve the academic and social experiences of Black students in AP English courses. Higher education administrators can also reshape the curriculum for pre-service teachers to include what the participants said they need from their teachers. With these ideas in mind, secondary schools like the research site in this study can achieve their institutional goals of increasing the number of Black students in AP courses. This study can also help to ensure that Black students can have a positive experience while in an AP English class.

Invisible Barriers to Advanced Placement English

For almost 75 years, students have been tracked or grouped, by (mis)conceptions of ability, into Advanced Placement classes as a means to extend student learning beyond the general education standards for their grades (Sadler, 2010). Though it is not a substitute for gifted education, research indicates that taking AP courses can contribute to later academic success (Breland et al., 2002; Gallagher, 2009; Hargrove et al., 2007; Keng & Dodd, 2007; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Participants in the study shared that taking an AP class significantly increased the skills that The College Board outlined for the course, and they felt more prepared for college because of the course. Recently, the College Board reiterated that they do not have any eligibility requirements for the course while recommending that schools minimize the barriers to taking their courses (AP Central, 2022).

The participants in this study shared that, consistent with The College Board's recommendations, they did not have eligibility requirements to enroll in the course. The research site requires that their sophomore teachers complete a recommendation form and that students meet with their counselors when deciding on courses; however, even if the counselor and the teacher do not recommend them for the course, they can still enroll. Ability grouping allows schools to group students in a way that matches their performance with the necessary educational experiences (Loveless, 2013; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016; Tieso, 2003). In some schools, inequitable tracking or grouping practices serve as vestiges of segregation (Legette, 2018). The participants in the study could self-select into the advanced classes. In theory, by diluting the importance of the educators' recommendations, this policy should have reduced the barriers to taking the course. Yet, when I asked the students if their teacher's recommendation mattered to them, they said that it did. Although it was not required, having a teacher say that they believed

that they were capable of taking an AP course was an important determining factor for whether they took the course.

While the literature on AP courses indicates that there is a correlation between college success and AP course participation, it also cautions the reader that there are variables to consider, such as the student's race, socioeconomic status, and internal motivation (Klopfenstein, 2003; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2010). Due to systemic issues like income disparities (poverty) and racism, even without institutional barriers like prerequisites, Black students are less likely to enroll in AP classes (Klopfenstein, 2003). Participants shared that while they enrolled in AP English and initially felt prepared for the course, they felt that their White counterparts were more prepared. They shared that White students are told from a very young age that they are advanced and should be in advanced classes, while many Black students do not receive the same message from their schools.

When reflecting on their experiences through a Critical Race Theory lens, these Black students did not receive the same inter-generational transfer of an assumed scholarly persona. Through CRT, educators should understand that Black students do not experience the privilege of entering into an elite academic space with the assumption that they will excel academically (Carbado, 2011; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1989; Dixson & Rousseau, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Educators maintain negative stereotypes about Black abilities, but what is worse is that so do the Black students. Feeling like everyone else in the class understands the material and is more prepared caused stress and anxiety for the participants in the study. This extreme self-doubt is what researchers refer to as the Imposter Syndrome (Clance and Imes, 1978). Although the participants had mixed experiences and some participants chose not to continue taking AP English classes, none of them regretted taking the course because the skill-building

opportunities aligned with their future academic goals. Their reflection on their experience supports the literature, which states that regardless of how well Black students do in the course, the experience of being in the course is academically beneficial to them (Hart, 2020; Jackson, 2010).

Black students revealed their academic and social experiences through journal entries and interviews. The participants' demeanor, intonation, and words indicated that they were grateful and perhaps relieved to finally share their experiences after a long and lonely school year. According to the literature, Black students do not have equal access to AP courses (Klopfenstein, 2003). Given that the participants revealed that they are usually the only Black student or one of two-three in their AP classes, Klopfenstein's (2003) data seems consistent with the participants' experiences. Participants relished the idea of breaking the silence that they endured throughout the school year, and their narratives reveal the need for support for teachers and students, reform, and further research in this area.

Academic Transformation through Teacher Identity and Pedagogy

The participants revealed that some of the most important factors in their classroom experience are their teacher's identity and their teachers' preparation for teaching Black students. As noted in the literature, from student preparation, to recommendations, to instructional techniques, and content, teachers have a large influence on Black students. Participants shared instances in which they felt that issues such as implicit bias clouded their teachers' judgments and precluded them from having the feedback that they needed to be academically successful. Researchers discussed a similar phenomenon when they talked about implicit bias and the negative repercussions that it has on Black secondary education students (Benner & Graham, 2013; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Sanders, 1997; Steele, 1997; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff,

2003). Consistent with the literature, many participants had negative experiences in their class and attributed it to stolid, biased teachers. Those participants decided not to take the senior AP Literature class – even if they had excellent grades in AP Language. Due to the school's open enrollment policy for taking AP courses, though teachers are not overtly sorting students, their actions still serve as a mechanism to perpetuate a system in which Black students are underrepresented in classes for high achievers (Elhoweris et al., 2005; Ford, 1998; Ford, 2010).

At the research site, despite the fact that half of the junior class takes the AP English course, and the department has several Black teachers, there are not any Black teachers who teach the junior level course. For many participants, this was their first AP course, as counselors recommended AP English as a great entry point for those who are curious about AP. However, given the racial demographics of teachers, there is a 100% chance that they will have a non-Black teacher. The participants in this study all had White teachers. This means that for this population of students in the study, where their teacher is on their journey of understanding their White identity development directly impacted their experience. There are various theories of White identity development, but the consistent idea that runs through them is that White identity development in America calls for those who identify as White to acknowledge racism and how they benefit from racist systems (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1984; Ponterotto et al., 2006; Sue, 2003). The prevailing theory is from Helms and Cook's (1999) research which includes six phases grouped into two phases. Phase One (contact, disintegration, reintegration) occurs as the individual begins to abandon racism and Phase Two (pseudo independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy) occurs as the individual begins to create a nonracist White identity.

Participants in this study struggled to achieve academic success when their teachers were still in the early stages of their White identity development. According to what the participants

described, many of their teachers were still in Helms and Cook's "contact" or "disintegration" stage, meaning that they still believed that they were colorblind or they had an awareness of racism, but they suppressed those ideas. Teachers in stages one or two reportedly became defensive when Black students seemingly impugned their curricular decisions – meanwhile, the students were simply attempting to express their discomfort with a microaggression or racist assignment. Critical Race Theory seeks to expose the dangers of a colorblind worldview; therefore, these teachers created an inimical and challenging environment for their students. Colorblindness, and other problematic approaches to avoiding racial identity exploration, result in a diminution in the number of Black students in AP classes.

Participants whose teachers were in the immersion/emersion or autonomy stages reported having more positive experiences socially and academically. One who is in these final stages of White identity development has a positive view of their White identity, understands the complexities of racism, and actively works toward becoming an anti-racist (Helms & Cook, 1999). Participants with teachers who were in these stages had classroom discussions about race that helped them to think critically about their racial identity. They reported having assignments in which they could choose to delve deeper into issues that were important to them as a Black person. Since their teachers had an intellectual knowledge of racism, they were able to call out microaggressions from White students and check in with Black students in a way that strengthened their academic performance.

In addition to White identity development, participants desired an environment that instilled a sense of well-being as a means to academic achievement through culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy. As Jeffries and Silvernail (2017) suggest, all teachers should learn and apply culturally responsive, anti-racist teaching methods in their classrooms to help traditionally

marginalized students to find success in advanced classes. Instead, some participants revealed

teachers' unduly pejorative comments about their work or future aspirations. The literature on

culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy reveals that schools should be counterhegemonic

spaces in which students leave feeling empowered (hooks, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Participants wanted an educational space that represented not only the teacher's values, but the

values of the students whom they were teaching; they desire "mirrors" of themselves and

"windows" into others' experiences (Bishop Sims, 1990). Culturally responsive and anti-racist

pedagogy calls on teachers to know their students' cultural identities, and they should use that

knowledge to shape the curriculum (Danielson, 2013; Delpit, 2012; Emdin, 2016; Hammond,

2015). Members of traditionally marginalized groups, like Black students, need teachers to use

culturally responsive educational methods to counter the marginalization and negative

stereotyping that occurs in society and in their educational history.

     Participants discussed many aspects of how they did (or did not) experience culturally

responsive nor anti-racist techniques from their teachers. Many participants noted the importance

of building a strong connection with their teacher. While they all desired a strong connection,

some teachers were more open to establishing that connection with the students than others. This

is important because AP classes are traditionally fast-paced, with a goal of earning a high score

on the AP exam in May. Teachers might not consider the importance of relationship-building

with students when they plan how best to use their instructional time. Some participants also felt

better about their academic challenges when teachers normalized the challenges and framed them

as universal and short-lived. This aligns with Walton and Cohen's (2011) study in that their

study found that Black students benefited academically from being reassured about their

academic challenges. In this study, the participants who felt like their teachers were invested in

their success put forth more effort into the class and had positive outcomes academically and socially. When considering culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy, the participants also noted that some of their best moments in the class were when they had opportunities to connect their cultural identity with the scholarly identity that they were cultivating in class.

Participants also felt like they thrived when their teachers had high expectations for them and partnered with them to meet those high expectations. The participant wanted to know that their teachers believed in their academic abilities. These experiences that the participant described aligned with Delpit's (2012) pedagogical strategies that educators could use to help ensure success for Black students. Hammond's (2015) views on culturally responsive teaching also include how strengthening student-teacher relationships and building an awareness of cultural identity can shape a student's experience. Hammond (2015) also explores the importance of creating a safe learning environment for students.

Participants said that creating a safe learning environment in an AP class is difficult because AP classes are inherently competitive, but emotional safety is important to their well-being, health, and academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Having an encouraging environment is also critical to Black students' academic success (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Gay, 2018). When considering culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy, participants recalled the positive feelings that they had when teachers allowed them to start the year with small group work, so that they could get to know the other students in class and have opportunities to share their ideas in a collaborative environment. Since Black students often experience isolation in AP classes, small group work allowed them to start to build connections with their classmates and build on the communal nature that Black and Brown students often desire (Hammond, 2015; Muhammad, 2019). Engaging in small group work early in the year and/or before needing to

share ideas in a large group setting also helped the participants to build self-confidence. Having these small moments of success are an important element of a culturally responsive classroom (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015).

Representation in Literature and Life: Belonging in the Curriculum

In the research site, the teachers have access to book lists replete with texts written by Black authors or about Black individuals. Participants shared varied experiences with the texts that the teachers selected for their curriculum ranging from appreciating that their teachers tried to make the curriculum inclusive, to feeling disheartened by how the teacher taught these texts. This range of experiences reflects the need for educators to move from inclusion to belonging when they make curricular decisions. Their experiences also revealed the importance of having texts that serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for all students (Sims, 1990). Sims describes the mirrors as text that reflect a student's experience, while the windows provide students with a view of others' cultural experiences. Sims believed that books could also serve as sliding glass doors, meaning that they could allow student to step into and briefly experience another's lived experience. In this study, the participants' experiences illustrate why it is important for all students to have mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors in their curricula.

When Critical Race Theory is applied to education, it reveals that the dominant culture's pedagogy often works from a deficit mindset that educators must reject in their journey to inclusion and belonging (Ladson-Billings, 2016). When one considers the purpose of education through a social reconstruction ideology, one understands the ways in which schools are shaped by the "hidden curriculum," which prioritizes Eurocentrism (Schiro, 2013). As the United States experiences its latest round of culture wars including (but not limited to) CRT in education, selective omissions/rewriting history, and discrepancies over the AP African American Studies

course, it is important to reflect upon the hidden curriculum while also considering what get hidden from the curriculum in many states.

CRT guides researchers to question storytelling, counter-storytelling, and race in American society (Dixson & Rousseau, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Researchers assert that Black experiences are either omitted or misrepresented in the curriculum, and what is included strips Black students of the opportunity to cultivate a positive racial identity (Au, Brown, & Calderon, 2016; Woodson, 1933/1996). The participants echoed some elements of this experience. Some participants, particularly those who ethnically identified as being African, enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about Black American culture by reading texts like *The Bluest Eye* and Frederick Douglass's narrative.

There were a couple of participants who had teachers who understood how to balance teaching the necessary AP skills while making time in the curriculum for discussions about how the characters' or individuals' experiences were shaped by their racial identity. There were also teachers who taught about violence against Black bodies for the sake of rhetorical analysis without acknowledging the human tragedy of the situation or considering how their Black students would feel trying to complete those assignments. All participants agreed with Au, Brown, and Calderon's (2016) assertions that the curriculum did not reach beyond Black people's identity as an oppressed people. Researchers contend that this kind of controlling, curricular violence serves to make Black students feel inferior, and it kills their aspirations (Coates, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2016; Woodson, 1933/1996). Researchers have explored curricular violence and the damaging effects it can have on students. This violence consists of omitting one's history, relaying false information, or presenting the information from a biased perspective (Allen et al., 2013).

Participants shared that they experienced all of these aspects of curricular violence, and it impacted them academically and socially. These texts and assessments resented the familiar recapitulation of narrative tropes about Black people. The participants shared that when they experienced curricular violence, they often opted out of the assignments. They would either procrastinate until the threat of a bad grade would be so harmful to their overall grade that they felt they had no choice but to complete the assignment, or they forego the assignment all together. This internal struggle is an experience that they felt their White counterparts did not have to undergo because texts about the dominant culture are varied. Stories about White characters have vicissitudes in their experiences - they are not all good, nor all bad. Since White students read about multiple nuanced experiences and see a wide breadth of what it means to be White, they are not forced to internalize a single, mostly-negative story about their race.

Participants shared that when teachers explored Black experiences, they taught it as a monolith. When they tried to discuss the positive aspects of oppression, they framed it as stories of resilience. On the surface, this could seem positive, but the participants revealed that the costs of being inundated with daily reminders of being treated less than White individuals did not outweigh the benefits of learning about resilience or resistance to oppression. Research indicates that when unskillful teachers try to include African American stories, it is often harmful to all of the students, misinforming White students about Black identity (Hillard, 2014; Picower, 2021). They shared that being taught that being Black means needing to be resilient constantly made them worry that they needed to be superheroes who are not vulnerable and who do not experience a wide range of emotions and experiences.

The participants lamented about the fact that White peers read texts about the multi-faceted experiences of being White while being Black is synonymous with struggle. Growing up

in a diverse affluent suburb, some participants did not identify with the experiences in the texts. This is not to say that history should not be taught. They felt that Morrison's and Douglass's texts were critical contributions to Black culture, but they craved more exposure to other literary works that told stories about Black existence outside of slavery and oppression.

Belonging and Classroom Connections

Participants described their emotional experiences in their AP classes - many of which are focused on their sense of belonging, or lack thereof. Belonging is feeling valued or connected to the other individuals in a community. Lewis et al. (2016) describe belonging in education as "the extent to which individuals feel like valued, accepted, and legitimate members in their academic domain." In reference to Black "folx" Love describes belonging as a "homeplace" typically led by women, in which people feel nurtured, comforted, and restored" (Love, 2019). At a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are subject to intense scrutiny, belonging can also be a term used to placate politically charged members of a community to achieve the same ends as equity work. (Lu, 2023). Some researchers believe that focusing on belonging represents an important reframing in the educational world. Instead of looking at students from a deficit mindset and focusing on their "gaps," educators can focus on the systems and cultures in schools that contribute to student success. Focusing on belonging is important because belonging can impact students' academic success and mental health (Lu, 2023). Walton and Cohen's (2011) study revealed that their psychological interventions ameliorated how students processed the negative experiences and feeling that they had on campus which increased their academic performance. Feeling connected to one's community is a basic human need, not specific to Black students; however, in elite academic spaces, the absence of that connection can create a barrier to students' performance (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

When considering the participants' Black identity and their sense of belonging, the participants often described what DuBois (1903) described as double consciousness. DuBois explained double consciousness as the experience of looking at oneself through the lens of another. For Black students, it is this repetitive inclination to measure one's thoughts, actions, and beliefs against a White culture. Participants came to class each day looking at themselves through the eyes of their White teacher and White peers. They constantly worried about what they said and how it would be received. This self-regulation contributed to their ability to complete the course; however, they had to endure the exhaustion of living with this constant fear of scrutiny. Participants recalled struggling with perfectionism, self-limiting behaviors like silence, and the imposter syndrome, which is consistent with the literature on Black student identity and belonging (Anderson, 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978; Ford & Harris,1996; Harper, 2019). When participants explored their perfectionism, they explained that it grew from the positive feelings that they felt as a child in advanced classes. Their early childhood education teachers rewarded them with special treatment, compliments, and affection when they did well or behaved a certain way.

They began associating their achievement with their self-worth – they were a good person worthy of attention because they did well in school. Unfortunately, they internalized that the opposite must be true, too. If they did not do well, or did not understand something in class, they felt ashamed and feared rejection from their teacher. They also worried that their teachers and their White peers would interpret any academic vulnerabilities as evidence that they did not belong in the class. There was no room for error; yet because the course is challenging, students often had questions. Participants shared that they rather have their questions go unanswered than ask their teacher, which was similar to the outcomes in Henfield et al.'s (2008) study. They often

tried to find a Black teacher or a teacher with whom they had an established relationship to ask for help; they could not risk being seen as imperfect.

Participants described a kind of Black exceptionalism that existed in their classroom culture. Because almost half of the junior class takes AP Language, there are negative stereotypes about the students who chose not to take the class. Black students in AP Language class experienced being seen as the exceptions to the negative stereotype, but this *award* was temporary and constantly under review by their teacher and classmates. The participants experienced Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "Acting White" phenomenon in a complex way. Some participants were skeptical of the other Black students in the class and just assumed that they were "acting White" as a means to fit in. They did not see themselves as "Acting White," although they did admit that they behaved differently in AP classes than in their general education classes. Needing to code-switch between classes reinforced the idea that Black students do not belong in AP classes.

This fear connects with the decades of research on the imposter syndrome and the negative impacts that it can have on students of color (Clance and Imes', 1978; Edwards, 2019; Peteet et al., 2015; Steele, 1997). Participants expressed that they received overt and subversive messages from the teacher and students that they did not belong in the class. They often could not be themselves in class because there was a pervasive sense of White culture in the classroom that some participants felt excluded them from the overall classroom culture. Most of the participants saw the AP classroom as a locus of hostility, one in which they were constantly trying to correct the misinformed notions of what it means to be Black. They were working to challenge the notions of Black people as unintelligent, and unworthy, while the texts that they

were reading seemed to either affirm these stereotypes or reinforce that there *could be* one or two exceptions to the stereotypes.

The participants believed that their experiences would have been better if they were in a class with more Black students because, as a collective unit, they could discuss the nuances of how Black people are represented in literature without feeling like a singular voice amongst many who simply do not understand. Some participants even advocated for a Black AP English class. This would differ from the court cases that have ruled against segregating students by race. Cases like Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) and McFadden v. Board of Education for Illinois School District U-46 (2013) made it clear that students could not be promised "separate, but equal" educational opportunities for students based on race. Based on the participant's experiences and the English content area, most participants felt that they would have more positive experiences if the administration had clustered them together, that is, placed several Black students in the same class.

Due to negative peer pressure, hyper-competitiveness, and teachers who lack identity development, Black students continue to struggle emotionally in AP Classes, which is consistent with the literature on the topic (Ford et al., 2008; Gratham & Ford, 2003). The participants revealed that they struggle with having a positive self-concept because they have chosen to take AP classes (Grantham & Ford, 2003). They vacillate between wanting to be accepted by their Black peers outside of class because they are their friends versus wanting to be accepted by their White peers because that is who they are with in class. Unfortunately, participants often reported feeling lonely and isolated in class because the White students would group together. If the teacher assigned groups for classwork, then the participants revealed that their White peers would question the validity of the participant's work, talk over them, or just ignore them

completely. If the teacher allowed the students to choose groups, then the participants shared that they would be amongst the last to be chosen.

When they encountered White peers who did not underestimate their intelligence, they were met with a unique response that they attributed to White liberalism. They reported that some of their White peers were afraid to critique their work as peer editors because they did not want to hurt their feelings, not realizing that they were actually doing the participant a disservice by not giving them helpful feedback. Participants revealed that this frustrated them because they would meticulously edit their White peers' work (out of fear of being deemed unintelligent) while they (the Black student) would receive a simple "good job" on their work. For the participant, this was yet another piece of evidence to support the notion that they were different, somehow less worthy of being in the class. The participants just wanted to be treated like the other students. For some students, that meant dropping down a level for the following year; the costs of being in AP were too great (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Ford, 1996; Ogbu, 2003).

Participants collectively reported experiencing high levels of stress in the AP English classroom. AP classes can elicit stress because students are learning advanced-level content and moving at a fast pace; however, they felt that their stress was different from that of their White peers because they had the added stress of social challenges unique to Black students (Ford, 1998). As noted earlier in this dissertation, when we review history through a CRT lens, there are many systemic issues (race, power, and social class) that contribute to under-enrollment in AP classes. The outcome of these systems of oppression is that while these Black students enrolled in AP, they still worried about being ridiculed or discouraged by Black students who opted out of AP English classes (Ford, 2008). The participants worried about being accepted by their peers enrolled in general education classes.

Their experience is connected to the literature on tracking and ability grouping because educators and students assume that students in advanced classes are there because they have similar intelligence levels, academic abilities, or motivation, and may look down on others as a result (Legette, 2020; Oakes, 2005; Van Houtte et al., 2013). Although the participants were Black and understood implicit bias and racism, many participants made negative assumptions about the classroom culture of the general education classes and the students within them. They experienced this paradox of feeling like they would not fit into a general education English class, while also feeling like they do not feel a sense of belonging in their AP English class.

Amplifying and Silencing Student Voice

Participants shared their views on the ways in which teachers could make changes that are within their control to improve the AP experience for Black students. They wanted teachers to understand that when students self-select into ability groups, like AP classes at this diverse suburban high school, the participants revealed that they could be academically successful, but they could lose out on critical social opportunities like making friends, engaging in study groups, and developing discussion skills. Their identity was held in abeyance during the 85-minute class period; they could not be themselves. They needed to work twice as hard as their White peers to make up for opting out of racist assignments, not seeking help from teachers, not asking questions in class, not engaging in discussions to process the material from class, and not receiving useful feedback from White peers. Therefore, participants recommended that teachers provide direct and clear instruction early in the school year to provide an equitable experience for all who take the course. Jeffries and Silvernail (2017) argue for teachers to create a more inclusive environment so that minoritized students can achieve academic success. They write, "teachers who use inclusive, equity-based instructional strategies advantage marginalized

students' ability to achieve success in academically demanding courses" (p.73). The participants' views aligned with Jeffries and Silvernail (2017), through their focus on equity and inclusivity.

As this could be some Black students' first AP class, the participants advocated for teachers' to provide them with an equitable start in the class through extra help, feedback, and revisions. When reflecting on inclusivity, participants shared their preference to avoid texts about violently killing Black people as opening activities. Participants desired texts that reflect a wider range of Black experiences to honor their ancestors and cultivate a new positive identity.

The participants shared that it was difficult for them to learn in an environment in which they felt that their teacher (and White peers) were not ready to or did not desire to become anti-racist. What made AP English unique is that unlike Math or science, so much of the content is about race, identity, and class. Participants revealed that to avoid these difficult subjects, Black students often differ to silence as a form of protest or self-preservation. Most participants revealed having negative social experiences or silencing themselves to avoid having negative experiences. Constantly repressing one's identity out of fear that it might detract from one's academic identity connects to stereotype threat, a phenomenon developed by Claude M. Steele (1995). Stereotype threat refers to a barrier that arises when a Black student has to perform a task, but is paralyzed by the implication that their race will negatively impact their ability to do the task. Researchers reveal that one's ability to perform a task is not solely contingent on their cognitive ability to do the task, but also relates to how one feels while doing the task (Aronson & Steele, 2005). Participants' silence during class is an example of them experiencing stereotype threat.

Participants revealed that even when a discussion was going to be graded, they opted out of speaking. Many students knew what they wanted to say during the discussion, but claimed

that they could not find the right time to speak. Other participants, who were more aware of the phenomenon, could name the fact that their fear of saying something "wrong" inhibited their speaking ability. In other instances, participants revealed silence as a means of showing solidarity with the other Black students in the class. Participants demonstrated that after a while, they developed specific personas in specific AP classes. Although it was never outwardly agreed upon, participants shared that for some of them, AP English became the class in which they did not speak – partially out of habit and partially out of a need to feel safe in the class. If they had critical ideas to share in the class, they would wait until the bell rang, and they would continue the discussion as they were all heading to the next class.

Participants recommended that teachers create a more welcoming environment before asking students to engage in texts, especially those concerning racism. Researchers contend that when Black students are in predominantly White classes with White teachers who do not use culturally responsive, anti-racist education strategies, students are more likely to experience racism and microaggressions (Pierce, 1970; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Participants described experiencing microaggressions or witnessing them happen to their Black classmates. These experiences reinforced the idea that AP is not a space for Black students and, in some cases, caused the students to decide not to take the senior-level AP English class. This is consistent with Henfield et al.'s (2008) research. Microaggressions and other racist acts can have lasting effects on Black students, contributing to their silent and withdrawn demeanor in class (Pierce, 1970; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Participants revealed feeling like they could not be human with all of the complex emotions that White students could express; they likened their experience to that of a mime in a box. They described thinking of themselves as being unprepared or even unworthy - like they

never were and never could be enough for the AP environment. In AP English classes, participants felt like they were forced to wear a mask to feel a semblance of validation and acceptance. They do not get to fully express their identity nor embrace the nuances that make them individuals. The participants described trying to contort themselves into an identity that their peers and teachers would deem acceptable. Researchers described such concerns as the in-group/out-group effect (Bruneau et al., 2020; Legette, 2020; Tajfel, 1978).

Participants revealed that a student's racial identity can shape their experiences and outcomes in advanced classes; the literature reveals similar findings (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Legette, 2018; Oakes, 1990). Students shared that they want educational justice - they do not want to feel like they must choose between socio-emotional well-being and taking an advanced class. The participants revealed that they deserve a class in which they can learn advanced content and feel like their complete selves.

Summary

Uplifting Black students' voices in AP English is a critical and complex task. Educators, administrators, those in higher education, and even those in the publishing industry need to understand what contributes to Black students' academic success and belonging. Participants revealed that they need trusting relationships with their teacher and peers, and they need literature that provides a more complete picture of Black culture and experiences in American society. The need to feel a sense of belonging transcends one's racial identity; however, it is especially important for Black students who race negative perceptions about Blackness in American society (Lu, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed that school is as much about connecting to others as it is about academic pursuits. The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the finding related to the literature about Black students and Advanced Placement English

classes through a Critical Lens Theory framework. In this chapter, I explored the invisible barriers to AP English classes. The participants revealed their experiences with the ability grouping that occurs in their school. Then I explored the participants' academic transformation through teacher identity and pedagogy. In this section, the literature supported the participants' assertions that their academic experiences differed depending on their teachers' identity development and their pedagogy. This section in this chapter explored how Black student identity is represented in the AP English curriculum and how students respond to those representations. The final section illuminated the importance of students' voices. Participants revealed that they are silenced or silence themselves in class. Therefore, they relished the opportunity to use their voice to offer recommendations on how teachers could improve Black students' academic and social experiences. The literature supported their beliefs on the need to change and their desire to change. This study should give all adults who have a role in a student's education, including parents and counselors, a window into their experiences so that they can provide better guidance and support for their advanced Black students.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

Conclusions

This chapter will conclude my study by summarizing the key findings related to the research questions and the research aims. I will explore the implications of this research study, discuss the limitations and close with a final reflection. In this research study, I sought to answer the following questions: How do Black students in a diverse suburban school describe their educational experiences in AP English class? How do Black AP English students describe their sense of academic success? How do Black AP English students describe their sense of belonging in this unique, seemingly diverse context? This study aimed to illuminate Black students' experiences in AP English classes. After analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing seven participants' journals and interviews, the participants revealed that Black students have a complex experience in AP English classes that differs from their White peers.

They revealed that while they can be academically successful in the course, they must work harder than their White peers to navigate the space, and they often leave the course with stronger skills and less of a sense of self. The participants revealed specific environmental challenges and curricular decisions that contribute to them not feeling a sense of belonging while achieving academic success. These include racist assignments, peers who see them as representations of Black stereotypes, teachers who see them through a deficit mindset, and texts that reinforce negative tropes about Black experiences. They also reveal some positive experiences from teachers who were farther along in their identity development, such as in-depth conversations about race, assignments that allowed them to research elements of their history or identity, and instructional time used to connect with the other students in class.

Reviewing the data through a critical race theory lens acknowledges the inequitable racial dynamic in AP classes because CRT reveals that one's race informs how their stories are told and contextualized; it also reveals hegemonic systems of oppression like racism and classism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). While the research reveals that Black students will learn to become better readers and writers by taking AP classes, they will struggle with their sense of belonging and identity. The conclusions of this study are connected to the research questions, literature, findings, and analysis. The conclusions address the following areas: (1) student and teacher preparation for the AP environment, (2) students' perceptions of their academic experiences related to teacher curricular decisions, (3) students' social experiences and how they describe their sense of belonging, and (4) the importance of student's voice in this research. In this chapter, I will address the significance and implications of the study's findings beginning with student and teacher preparation.

Student Preparation and Teacher Identity in the AP Environment

This research project aimed to investigate Black students' experiences in the AP classroom and how they describe their sense of academic achievement in the class. The results indicate that when teachers identified them as intelligent, gifted, or advanced early in their education, those experiences gave them the confidence to take AP classes and the resilience to endure the classes with negative experiences. Often, they developed their scholarly identity because a teacher saw their academic potential and helped to cultivate it in the student. As the Expectancy Value Theory suggests, a student's motivation is connected their expectancy for success at a given task (Wingfield, 1994). Most participants revealed that teachers identified them as advanced in elementary or middle school, and they internalized this scholarly identity as a part of their sense of self.

Black students face negative peer pressure from other Black students that can create a barrier to taking the class and dissonance while enrolled (Ford, 2008). While this is true, early identification as a scholar provided a shield against the negative peer pressure that some Black students face. While the participants revealed that their Black friends in other classes did not understand their desire to take AP classes when they can be academically challenging and emotionally damaging places, these participants stayed in the AP courses. Participants had become experts in Black students' AP survival techniques by high school, such as code-switching, perfectionism, and imposter syndrome. These protective and sustaining measures hid their true selves and decreased the risk of embarrassment. They have even had experiences with teachers with negative stereotypical beliefs about Black students' capabilities. When Black students have the opportunity to identify as a scholar early in their education, they begin to have exposure to specific phenomena and learn the necessary skills to achieve academic success.

Since the data revealed that early identification for advanced learning opportunities is essential to the participants, as schools consider how to make education more equitable, they should not eliminate them in elementary and middle school education. Participants shared that without their early childhood academic experiences, they probably would not have felt prepared to take AP classes. Meanwhile, in 2021, then NYC Mayor DeBlasio announced that his administration would eliminate gifted and talented programs in NYC schools to combat segregation within the school system (Shapiro, 2021). Instead of prohibiting such programs, schools should investigate their biased systems and practices perpetuating the myth that AP classes are for White students.

The participants also revealed that having a teacher farther along in their White identity development creates an environment in which they are more likely to succeed. As this study

sought to illuminate how Black students describe how they achieve academic success in the AP English classroom, the participants revealed that teacher and student preparation for the AP environment could shape their beliefs and actions in the classroom. While all individuals should try to understand their own racial identity, this research has revealed that it is critically important that teachers understand the complexities of racism and are continually learning how to be antiracists. Based on the participant's experiences, teachers need professional development experiences to help guide their identity development.

Culturally Responsive Education and AP Students' Academic Experiences

When participants reflected on their academic experiences in terms of the teachers' pedagogy and teaching methods, they revealed that equitable curricular decisions helped to contribute to student success. The data revealed deeper systemic issues concerning how teachers utilize culturally responsive teaching within their AP curriculum, which could help reshape Black students' experiences. The study's data revealed that certain teachers were further behind in their identity development and had not internalized the professional development opportunities available at the high school rendering a curriculum that is colorblind, racist, or harmful to Black students.

Participants leave de-tracked English courses and encounter AP English (in many cases) as their first AP course. Since they have not had previous experience in advanced high school English classes, the workload and speed can shock students. They reported struggling with the content early in the semester, especially when teachers did not take the time to review specific skills that were required for the course. The participants admitted that they performed better when the teacher explicitly taught skills without judgment or assumptions about what students should know, giving all students an equal opportunity for success in the class. They appreciated

the opportunity to preview AP-style questions and write bi-weekly in-class essays. For example, the literature states that allowing students to preview test material helps decrease anxiety and minimize stereotype threat (Steele, 1997).

While teachers at this research site have the opportunity to learn about culturally responsive education, they do not always apply it to AP classes which negatively impacts Black students' academic experiences. These findings are complex in that all the participants in the study earned As or B+'s in the course, so on the surface, it would seem that they had positive academic experiences; however, their interviews told a more nuanced story of their academic experiences in the class. They could achieve academic success, but to do so, they described having to complete the assignments while needing to suppress their Black identity and personality. They were keenly aware that their White peers did not need to suppress their identity to be able to complete their assignments. At times, when it was too painful, the students simply chose not to do their work which has lasting implications for their skill development and grades. Black students need anti-racist teachers and an anti-racist curriculum to find both academic success and belonging in the AP classroom. They needed a curriculum that provided them with "windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors" (Sims, 1990).

Researchers characterize culturally responsive pedagogy as empowering, but many participants reported academic experiences and assignments that felt belittling or oppressive (Ford & Harris, 1999; Ladson-Billings,1995; Muhammad, 2020). In the last few years, the English department at the research site has offered professional development opportunities focused on various equity frameworks, including Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* and Gholdy Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius*. These texts encourage teachers to infuse their curriculum with identity and skill development while acknowledging and

celebrating the humanity within each student. Since teachers have theoretically learned this information and students report having opposite experiences, there is a disconnect between the institutional goals of equitable teaching practices and the AP students' experiences.

In a time when Black students are already at risk for low achievement and engagement because of systemic issues which might have impacted their skill development, educators must use culturally responsive and anti-racist educational methods to choose their curriculum and to prepare their lesson and unit plans (Ford et al., 2008). If schools genuinely prioritize equity in education, then they should be committed to presenting a curriculum that is not only culturally responsive and anti-racist but is affirming and liberating for Black students. Black students are scholarly individuals who want to see examples of other Black scholars in their classrooms and curriculum. These students know they deserve to see a diverse representation of Black experiences and contributions to American culture.

Though representation in the curriculum is essential, making these changes could be unpopular and illegal in certain states because of the most recent culture wars in the United States. In 2022, Governor Ron DeSantis signed a law that limits how racism and other controversial topics are discussed in schools because Floridians do not want White students to feel "guilt" or "responsibility" for America's past (Mazzei, 2023). These same laws were used to justify Florida's State Board of Education's ruling that banned The College Board's AP African-American Studies class. As participants in this study ask for more representation and Black history, teaching a culturally responsive and anti-racist curriculum could be more difficult in certain states.

Due to the culture wars and national debate on what should be taught in schools, curricular violence has become commonplace while inclusivity is villainized and condemned as

"woke" culture eroding American society. This omission or denial of Black contributions to American society was ever present in the University of North Carolina's decision to offer their alumni and prize-winning journalist, Nikole Hannah Jones a tenured position without tenure. Many saw this unusual occurrence as a retaliation for her world renowned, Pulitzer Prize winning work, The 1619 Project. Even in the highest levels of academia, Black history is being silenced while Black voices are being denied.

Belonging to the AP Classroom Community

Participants in this study also shared experiences that made them feel a sense of belonging in the classroom community or isolation from the community. The social conditions in the AP English class created an environment that negatively impacted students. The AP environment, which is already stressful because of the rigor and speed, is even more challenging for Black students because they receive overt and subtle messages that they do not belong in the class. Students who shared positive social experiences attributed them to their teacher's relentless commitment to relationship-building. Teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationship-building are vital components to Black students feeling a sense of belonging in the AP English class.

Participants reported that early and frequent attempts at relationship-building were important to them. Research supports the notion that relationships can impact Black student enrollment in advanced courses (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017). This study reveals that Black students have a unique experience in AP English classes. While some of their experiences are positive, most of their experiences were rooted in racist systems of oppression and deficit thinking from teachers and peers. They described feeling like they could not engage in classroom activities because they feared being ridiculed, infantilized, or condemned by their teacher and

peers. They described feeling isolated from the dominant social environment. They characterized their experiences by survival and coping mechanisms instead of by moments that helped to strengthen their self-worth positively. The participants saw the course as a means to an end - something to endure, rather than a place to learn more about their culture or identity. As the school continues to prioritize increasing enrollment in AP classes, there is an immediate need for educators and administrators to evaluate their curriculum, policies, and procedures. Acknowledging and addressing these issues honors the "emotional labor" that Black students must endure to find success in the AP English classroom (Armah, 2022, p. 84).

This research is significant because AP students are usually the students who seem to need less support. Schools often categorize AP students as high-achieving and independent learners; therefore, in my experience, when teachers work toward "closing gaps" or meeting other change-based initiatives, they rarely focus on AP students. In some settings, educators regard discussions about AP classes with resentment or exasperation because of The College Board's complex reputation. Given that Black students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement Courses, the students in the class could be viewed as privileged or exceptional, not needing additional support. However, this research has revealed that students who take AP classes need academic and emotional support just like students who enroll in general education classes. Their emotions range from palpable frustration to subdued resignation. These participants have demonstrated that students need support regardless of ability group status.

AP English classes could allow Black students to redefine or reimagine their Black identity. While research indicates that Whiteness is associated with intelligence, this study suggests that the structure and freedom inherent in teaching an AP class could provide Black students with the opportunity to learn more about their scholarly identity and feel more

connected with their peers (Ford et al., 2008). As our country emerges from a global pandemic, our society has learned the value of interpersonal connections, and educators have learned that students come to school for more than academic purposes. They need school as a social outlet and a place to experience human connections. Unsurprisingly, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the New York Times also claimed that the United States was experiencing a national epidemic related to teens and mental health (Richtel, 2022). This research reveals that especially if Black students in a diverse school are going to enroll in courses in which they are the only Black student, educators must work diligently to foster connections with the students.

The Importance of Black Student Voice

The participants in this study used their experiences to create recommendations so educators can improve the Black student experience in AP English classes. Some participants revealed having a sense of agency due to speaking out against racist assignments, correcting microaggressions, and re-educating their peers about Black history. In some ways, resisting these oppressive moments gave students a sense of purpose and even sparked a desire to use their skills to speak out against injustice. While this is a positive outcome, the fact remains that students overwhelmingly struggled in the course. This sample of students identified ways that teachers can improve experiences for Black students in AP. According to the participants, teachers should: (1) Become anti-racist through individual identity development, (2) Group Black students together for small group work early in the school year so they can get to know each other, (3) Provide more opportunities for collaborative learning through group work so all students can feel connected and interdependent on one another, (4) Make time for community building, (5) Dedicate time for skill building without judgment, (6) Highlight Black authors'

accomplishments to normalize Black scholarship, and (7) Add texts by Black authors that are not about being enslaved or racially oppressed – highlight the beauty and joy in Black identity.

While I primarily focused this research study on students' experiences in the classroom with their teachers, the participants also provided recommendations for the administrators who control the school's systems of power and policies. When reflecting on ways that the administration could improve the Black student experience in AP English, they listed the following ideas: (1) Increase outreach and early advanced learning programming, mainly from Black educators, (2) Educate parents about the benefits of Advanced Placement and how best to prepare one's child, (3) Create Black Affinity Spaces for students in AP, (4) Encourage Black teacher/student mentorship relationships, (5) Change the fear-based messaging about AP courses, (6) Hire more Black teachers, (6) Create Black or BIPOC teacher affinity spaces to help support Black AP teachers, (7) Cluster Black students in AP classes so that they are not the only Black student, and (8) offer a section of AP that is for Black students.

Black students want to develop trusting relationships with their teachers and with the students in their classes. They want to get to know their teachers, and they want their teachers to get to know them as individuals. They shared that when they believed they could trust their teachers, they felt more compelled to seek assistance from their teachers, ask questions in class, and perform at a higher level. In order to achieve academic success and feel a sense of belonging, participants wanted to know that they could come to class and be their authentic selves without worrying about negative Black stereotypes or speaking on behalf of all Black people.

Though taking an AP class is not a prerequisite for college, the global pandemic has magnified certain admissions practices that some deemed inequitable and provided schools with

opportunities to course correct. Schools have deemphasized standardized test scores, making students' transcripts a more meaningful indicator of a student's commitment to a rigorous education. Therefore, making AP classes welcoming and equitable for Black students is critical because not taking AP classes at one's high school could be interpreted as not challenging oneself, when in reality, Black students could just be avoiding hostile learning environments.

Recommendations

Teacher Education Programs and Faculty

Based on the phenomena that the participants revealed, teacher education programs should include more racial identity courses. These courses should provide mirrors, windows, and sliding doors. This means White teachers should learn about their identity development (mirrors); they should learn about identity development for other racial groups (windows); they should have experiences that situate them in the experiences of another culture (sliding glass doors). Since participants have shared the negative and positive outcomes that students can experience depending on their teacher's White identity development, teacher education programs should have classes dedicated to identity development explicitly related to classroom pedagogy. Pre-service teachers should learn about the convergence of one's identity and biases concerning student interactions.

Based on the participants' academic experiences in AP English classes at this diverse high school, the teacher education programs should also revise curricula to include culturally responsive and anti-racist education strategies. There can be a disconnect between theory and practice, especially for preservice teachers. Therefore, teacher education programs should not only educate pre-service teachers about culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching techniques, but they should also include time for students to learn practical applications for these techniques.

Preservice teachers should be evaluated on their ability to utilize culturally responsive and anti-racist education methodologies in the classroom to ensure that it becomes engrained in their practice. Schools cannot teach culturally responsive and anti-racist methods as a stand-alone course or an elective, rather, these ideas should be a part of the fundamental values for each of their classes so that as they develop their professional skills, they are constantly reminded of these larger pedagogical expectations.

Administrators

Although The College Board offers specific guidance on skills in AP English classes, they have left it up to the school administration's discretion to choose the texts for the course. This means that schools could offer AP English classes that meet all of the standards and requirements for AP English classes, but they could offer sections that focus on Black, Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous literature. Having these identity-themed classes could redefine the space and excite BIPOC students to want to be in AP classes and inspire BIPOC teachers to teach the course.

The participants revealed that being the only Black students in a class made their experiences extraordinarily difficult. It is incredibly challenging when the students are in a diverse school. Going from a general education class that has a plethora of Black, Latinx, and Asian students to an AP class that has one or none reinforces the idea that Black students do not belong in advanced classes. When students are in a school with other BIPOC students, the administrators must try to have multiple Black students in a class to help students feel a sense of community and belonging.

In addition to addressing representation in the student population, administrators should also consider representation amongst the AP English teachers. As noted in the discussion section,

though students achieved academic success in classes with White teachers, they repeatedly shared that they wanted more Black teachers, especially in AP classes. Representation matters, and if we want Black students to understand that they belong in AP, they must see Black adults in the classes. Having Black teachers will also refute the idea that AP is a space exclusively for White teachers and students.

Teachers

As the participants expressed, teachers (veteran and new) should strive to become anti-racist and work toward ensuring that their anti-racist worldview is evident in their personal and professional lives. This study has pointed out that so much of the Black student experience is contingent upon the teachers' commitment to anti-racism. With or without structured professional development, teachers should seek resources and texts to challenge colorblindness or other harmful notions about race. Given the political controversy surrounding inclusivity in curriculum, teachers should utilize their resources to learn how one's identity can shape their learning environment.

Schools should offer support and additional training to AP Teachers. Teachers at this research site learn about culturally responsive and anti-racist education; however, when a teacher is going to teach AP, they attend separate professional development hosted by The College Board on how to teach the class. These professional development sessions are often large regional events and do not discuss culturally responsive and anti-racist education. Therefore, it is possible for teachers to feel that they should teach their general education classes using culturally responsive and anti-racist education and teach the AP classes differently. There needs to be clear messaging and professional development on how to make AP classes equitable spaces.

The students revealed that curricular choices and teachers' pedagogy affect academic success. In a high school where equity and diversity are part of the institutional goals, those responsible for creating the curriculum should seek an AP curriculum that is diverse, inclusive, and welcoming to Black students. For participants who did not have experiences with reading literature by a Black author or about Black characters, Black students need to read texts that reflect their racial or ethnic identity; this is not an easy task. While the research site provides many options for texts by Black authors or about Black individuals, the participants reported that often the stories were about being enslaved for fighting for civil rights. While these experiences are significant in the history of Black people in America, these are not the only experiences nor the only contributions. So much literature about Black individuals or Black culture is about oppression or resistance to oppression. Yet, this generation of students is searching for examples of Black contributions and Black scholarliness. As historians and journalists continue to unearth narratives about Black scholarliness, African civilizations, and Black contributions to American society, teachers can supplement their curricula with these stories to help mend the chasm between Black excellence and recognition for that excellence.

AP teachers, particularly those who teach English and history classes, are uniquely situated to be gatekeepers for AP classes. Since half of the junior class takes AP English or an AP English and US History block, for many students, AP English Language and Composition is their introduction to AP courses. If students had negative experiences in the course, they will not register for additional AP classes in their senior year, and they will influence their friends to avoid taking AP classes. Because of these factors, students, especially Black students, come to the classes reticent of the environment. Unfortunately, their fears and anxieties can be reinforced by the classroom culture that the teacher cultivates. Building a communal culture early in the

school year will help students to feel connected and willing to seek help when needed. In her research, Gholdy Muhammad (2021) discussed the Black literacy societies in the 18th and 19th centuries. There was an energy and purpose to those groups because they saw themselves as empowering themselves and sharing the knowledge they learned to help strengthen the community. Teachers should conjure energy that was most likely radiating within these literacy societies. Participants revealed that feeling valued by one's community and feeling a sense of purpose contributed to their sense of belonging and willingness to participate in the class.

Participants must feel supported and valued to share their voices in class. Especially in a class that privileged written and verbal expression as assessments, it is imperative that students feel comfortable sharing their ideas. Participants silenced themselves rather than make themselves vulnerable in class, sometimes to the detriment of their grade on an assignment. If teachers understood the degree to which Black students scrutinize themselves or judge themselves harshly through a perfectionist's lens, they could lead with empathy in the classroom.

Students and Parents

Black students are often underrepresented in advanced learning opportunities because of systemic issues such as deficit thinking, implicit bias, and racism (Ford, 2014). Therefore, students and parents should seek out programs and opportunities that allow Black students to assume a scholarly identity at a young age. If parents have the resources, they should enroll students in extracurricular advanced academic programming. Though some of these programs are contingent upon standardized test scores, if students enroll early in elementary school, they might not be bound to such stringent requirements. Some programs even offer scholarships for students who cannot afford the tuition.

The participants in this study revealed that they want to feel a sense of community. This research, and the literature supporting it, reveals that having a space where they can debrief, reflect, share advice, and seek guidance can be healing for students. It helps them learn how to navigate difficult situations, normalizes these complex experiences, and it helps to affirm their Black scholarly identity. As Black students learn to navigate predominantly White classrooms, predominantly White professions, and predominantly White systems in the United States, having therapeutic emotional support systems in place can be an important for Black students. In this study, the literature revealed that students could experience belonging and academic success with the correct emotional support systems (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

In addition to experiencing belonging and academic success, this research demonstrates the need for increased inclusivity as it pertains to the larger society, yet this is no easy task. As Rogers and Kahne (2022) report, "It is challenging to create educational institutions that are more equal, inclusive, and participatory than the society in which they reside." Teachers have a herculean task – they must create opportunities for students to "engage in limited and respectful dialogue on controversial topics" and "address misinformation" at a time when it is increasingly difficult to do this without admonishment and censure (Walker, 2023). This is truly an "existential moment" in education in which society must question the purpose of education and align our policies and practices accordingly (Walker, 2023). If this misalignment continues, it will not only erode the foundation of our schools, it will corrode the ideals of American society.

Concluding Remarks

As my work on this research project comes to a close, this process has completely augmented my worldview and will forever influence my professional and personal life. I am grateful for all of the researchers whose work was the foundation for my research. While the

literature review was a painstaking process, I read those articles with a voracious appetite, wanting to know more about the scholarly work in fields such as gifted education, Critical Race Theory, advanced placement, and identity development. As I continued my research, I noticed parallel conversations in the media. The controversy around Nikole Hannah-Jones' *1619 Project*, New York's mayor attempting to get rid of gifted programs, the political backlash against Critical Race Theory, and most recently, Florida's State Board of Education's rejection of AP American Studies class. The convergence of these national events and my research gave me even more of a sense of purpose. At a time when race and education are at the forefront of most political discourse, and discussing race in education is under attack, this research reveals that educators must consider a student's racial identity when they teach.

As a result of this research, I have begun advocating for minoritized students in a way that I would not have felt empowered to before this academic journey. While the high school where I work has a student group focused on equity in AP, I began an affinity space for Black students to share their experiences. We meet monthly, and I built the structure of those meetings based on the research that I was reading for this dissertation. During those meetings, we explore Black excellence in modern culture, ranging from Black scholars to Black cultural contributions. Then we explore Black excellence amongst the group; students can share their academic, athletic, or social accolades with this support group. Lastly, we have large group discussions about specific topics related to their experiences as Black students in AP, such as course selection, AP STEM classes, and how to handle microaggressions in class. I have presented to our school board for the past two years regarding this support group, and I am happy to report that the group has steadily grown since its inception last year.

In addition, this research made me more aware of the gaps that I had in my knowledge about culturally responsive and anti-racist education and identity development as a pre-service teacher. My teacher education program did not teach about culturally responsive teaching, nor did they explore identity development and how one's understanding of their identity can impact pedagogy. During this research process, I read articles and books relating to my topic, but I also questioned where I am in my own identity development. I immersed myself in literature by Black authors, books and articles about Black history before slavery, books about Jamaican history, American history, and memoirs by successful Black people in the United States. Learning my history and surrounding myself with stories about Black excellence was a buoy to my soul as I struggled to complete this dissertation. Expanding my understanding of Black history also changed how I taught my AP classes because I could share my knowledge with my students, alter my teaching strategies, and share these experiences with my colleagues.

As a result, I have partnered with an instructional coach in my department to hold monthly professional development meetings for AP teachers about topics such as the following: (a) Creating Classroom Groups and Study Groups, (b) inclusivity in the AP Classroom, (c) Course Selection, (d) Assessment and Grading, (e) Teachers' Racial Identity, and (f) Student-Teacher Relationships. These sessions have been well-received among the staff, but I relish the time spent preparing for these discussions. As a qualitative researcher firmly grounded in critical theory, the idea of empowering my colleagues (and students) to resist the existing educational structures and processes is enlivening and liberating.

Finally, this research has implications beyond those in the educational realm. Black students in AP want to read stories about Black individuals having human experiences not marked by trauma. For example, Ibi Zoboi's *Pride*, a modern adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride*

and Prejudice, explores a young adult's relationships with her family and friends as she navigates a gentrifying Brooklyn landscape. When I introduced this book to my students as a part of our *Pride and Prejudice* unit, my Black students happily read it as an independent reading book. This means that publishing companies should publish books that provide a diverse view of Black experiences. The participants shared that all of the literature that they read from or about Black individuals was about violence or self-loathing. They want stories and articles that portray Black experiences as positive and that show Blackness as an identity that they want to embrace, not reject.

As I review this research project and its implications, I cannot help but liken it to one of my favorite hobbies…gardening. As a gardener, I know that in order to cultivate plants (or people) the soil must be primed to receive the plant. All too often, in haste, I have simply thrown the new plant into the soil, hoping that it will survive, only to have mother nature remind me that without the proper preparation, time, and care, my precious plants will not grow. When Black students describe their experiences in their AP classes, the sentiment is the same. Teachers with the best intentions and resources use their skills-based curriculum to teach students the course material - they simply throw the seeds into the soil. However, by the end of the course, the student either has not grown or is so exasperated by the course that they would not deem their time in the class as a positive experience.

Before teachers can teach their given or chosen curriculum, they must prime the soil within their students. What does this mean for students in an AP Classroom? Students learn best when they have developed a trusting relationship with their teacher, when they think the teacher cares about their well-being and their academic success, when they feel like the curriculum will help them to learn about a positive outlook on Black identity, when the teacher focuses on skills

with the goal of quality feedback toward improvement, and when the teacher cultivates a

classroom culture to ameliorate fear and anxiety. Ultimately, this research is about maximal

inclusive educational opportunities for Black students. My hope is that as a result of this study,

students will experience the same joy and fulfillment in their AP English classes as I have had in

preparing this work for them.

Appendix A

J. Elliott-Schrimmer   Research Study Journal Response

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. In order to gain a better understanding of your academic experiences in elementary school and high school, I am asking you to answer these three reflection questions in written form. These questions are centered on your historical experience versus the interview which will be focused on your more recent experiences in your AP English class(es). Allowing you to answer these questions before our interviews begin gives you some time to think about your entry and interest in advanced classes. Please respond to each question in at least one paragraph. Thank you!

<u>**Your Educational History**</u>

Journaling can function as a great way to be reflective, boost your confidence, and explore details from one's past that one might have forgotten. Especially during these challenging times, it is important to organize one's feelings in a thoughtful way.

This specific writing experience is a chance for you to reflect on **your history as a learner.** Consider the following guiding questions as you write your journal entry.

- What educational opportunities were available to you as an elementary and middle school learner? If possible, consider advanced (gifted) learning opportunities.

- Do you feel that your experiences were equitable and encouraging? If so, explain how those experiences inspired you. If those experiences were negative, explain how those experiences discouraged you.

- What is the relationship between your history as a learner and your current experience?

Appendix B

Jody Elliott-Schrimmer

Dissertation Interview Protocol

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the social and academic experiences of Black students in AP English class at a diverse suburban high school. This study aims to illuminate your experiences. By participating in this study, students will also have the ability to help revise the curriculum for future students as we continually work toward gender and racial equity in the AP classroom. There are several types of risks associated with the study and the interviews. The interviews will be recorded with a digital app and saved on my password protected computer under coded names. All identifying information will be removed during transcription. Quotes and references from these transcripts may be used as content in my dissertation.

Research Question

How do Black students in AP English classes describe their educational experiences in a diverse suburban school?

Sub-questions:

Background Questions:
1. How do you self-identify in terms of race and ethnicity?
2. How do you self-identify in terms of gender?
3. Why did you decide to take AP English?
4. How would you describe your AP English class?
5. What is the racial identity of your teacher or teachers?
6. How would you describe the relationship between you and your teacher?
    1. You and your classmates?
2. How many other Black or African American students are in your class?

Skills:
1. What do you think is the most important skill or idea taught in your AP English class?
2. What are some creative ways that your teacher has taught important skills in your AP Literature class?
3. In your class, how much did your teacher center the AP exam or skills instead of other learning goals?
4. What support is available to you if you struggle with learning the skills?

5. What is your last quarter grade in your English class?
6. Do you feel like your grade was reflective of your capabilities? Why? Why not?

Identity:
1. In your AP English class, how have you learned about your feelings related to your racial identity?
2. What texts or activities did your teacher use to give you a better understanding of your identity?
3. In your AP English class, how have you learned about what others think of your racial and gender identity?
4. Which texts, materials, and activities did your instructor use to help you to understand others' view on your racial identity?
5. In your AP English class, how have you learned about who you desire to be?
6. Which texts, materials, and activities did your instructor use to help you to understand who you desire to be?
7. In what ways do you see your racial and gender identity reflected in the literature that you read?
8. How and when do you learn about the lives of others?

Criticality:
1. Do you feel like you have been taught to make sense of injustice in the world toward social transformation in your AP English class?
2. Which texts speak to/spoke to how you view injustice in the world? (Which texts focused on injustice?)
3. How does the curriculum (including texts and activities) engage your thinking about power and equity and the disrupting of oppression?
4. Can you recall a time when you felt uplifted or celebrated in the AP English classroom?
5. Can you recall a time when you felt dehumanized or devalued in the AP English classroom?

6. What could the teacher have done to improve the experience that you recalled in your previous question?

Intellectualism:
1. How would you describe the way your teacher speaks with/engages you as a student during class?
2. Is his/her/their style similar to other English teachers in the past?
3. How would you describe the way your classmates of other racial identities speak to you during class?
4. How do classmates of other racial identities respond to your ideas?
5. Do you feel that the AP English class connects to the social and political problems? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. Do you feel like your teacher creates a sense of belonging or community for Black students in your AP class? If so, how? If not, why not?

Curricular and Classroom Culture Recommendations:

1. If we were restructuring the class, what is one aspect of the class that you would definitely keep?

2. If we were restructuring the class, what would be the first thing that you would want to change?

3. If you could teach your own AP English class, what are three things that you would prioritize in your class?

4. What do you think the school can do to increase the number of Black students taking AP courses?

5. What are your recommendations for how teachers can improve the Black student experience in AP English classes?

Final Question: Do you have anything that you would like to add that I haven't asked about in terms of your experience as a Black student in the AP English classroom?

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