

DISRUPTING ENROLLMENT PRACTICES FOR ADVANCED COURSES:
EXPLORING WAYS TO CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP FOR BLACK HIGH
SCHOOL STUDENTS

A Dissertation
by
JON E. FLEISHER

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APPROVED BY:

Kimberly Money, Ed.D.
Chairperson, Dissertation Committee

Chris Osmond, Ph.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Julie Hasson, Ed.D.
Member, Dissertation Committee

Vachel Miller, Ed.D.
Director, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Marie Hoepfl, Ed.D.
Interim Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

DISRUPTING ENROLLMENT PRACTICES FOR ADVANCED COURSES: EXPLORING WAYS TO CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP FOR BLACK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Jon E. Fleisher:
B.S., MacMurray College
M.S.A., Appalachian State University
Ed.S., Appalachian State University
Ed.D., Appalachian State University

Dissertation Committee Chairperson: Dr. Kimberly Money

In this research project, I use Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to investigate the central problem of why there is a disproportionately low number of Black students in advanced courses. In this qualitative study, I explored the experiences of four Black students in advanced high school courses. The purpose of my work in this dissertation was to first disrupt the current enrollment practices in high schools. Secondly, I explored ways to close the opportunity gap in advanced high school courses for Black students. The findings from my research helped inform recommendations for school leaders to close the opportunity gap at their schools.

Ultimately, the actionable manifestation of my research was the development and organization of a community outreach program. The outreach event served as an opportunity for underrepresented students and their families to learn about the benefits of advanced courses and how to navigate the educational system. The design and intent of this research-

based community initiative can serve as a model for other schools and communities to promote more expansive opportunities for students of color in advanced high school courses.

Acknowledgments

“Dripping water hollows out stone, not through force but through persistence.”
~ Ovid

This dissertation was certainly my “stone.” Sometimes the work flowed as if I had the power of a waterfall behind me, but it was the consistent persevering work *one drop at a time* that led to a smooth hollow “stone.” I am proud of the perseverance and mental capacity that I found within myself to finish this project.

First and foremost, I want to thank my partner and wife, Tara Fleisher, for her constant and consistent love, support, and timely motivation. She served as my rock to lean on, my main cheerleader, a shoulder to cry on, and my number-one fan during this process. I certainly am not writing this acknowledgment without her presence at every step. I love you and I am proud to share this accomplishment with you—you are my hero!

I remember hearing during orientation for the Educational Leadership program that we needed to find our support circle because the journey was going to be challenging and would require sacrifices. I learned that the sacrifices came in many forms, but one of those forms was missing time with family. My family was always understanding and supportive when I had to miss events, sequester myself in our home office to read and/or write while they enjoyed fellowship and conversations, and when I would stay in the hotel room or resort while on vacation to work on this project. I will forever appreciate being allowed to chase my dream guilt-free. Thank you to my children — Mason, Jensen, Akeela, and Brennin — for being part of my support nation.

I offer a special heartfelt thank you to my youngest child, Brennin, for her time and unwavering commitment to carefully creating a visually outstanding presentation. She is a talented graphic designer and she made me look far better than I deserved for my defense.

I certainly want to mention the participants and the community stakeholders who graciously donated their time and resources to this project. The community outreach event was made possible with your help and support. The real rockstars of this research study are the participants—thank you!

I will never be able to fully and sufficiently express my gratitude and appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Kimberly Money, for her time, dedication, and perseverance in guiding me through this journey—especially during the last few weeks and days prior to my defense. Her mentorship means more to me than any professional gift I have been given. She afforded me great latitude to create and craft *my* vision for this dissertation while also providing the perfect balance of guidance and motivation to keep me on course. Dr. Money, I will forever treasure your words of wisdom, advice, and selfless sacrifice during this journey. Thank you!

Looking back from this point it seems like a lifetime has passed since I nervously sent a couple of clumsy emails asking Dr. Osmond if he could meet with me to discuss a possible dissertation committee chair and members, but I remember the process as if it were yesterday. I vividly remember being very excited after all was settled because I knew I had the perfect committee for me and this project. Dr. Hasson and Dr. Osmond provided additional perspectives and insight that helped bring this journey to a successful close. I truly appreciate Dr. Osmond's experience as a committee member because he provided timely and

valuable feedback that helped me elevate my work to a level at which I would not have been capable on my own.

I am extremely fortunate and privileged to have been a student in the Educational Leadership program at Appalachian State University under the direction of Dr. Vachel Miller. He was accessible, supportive, and understanding and always provided meaningful insight and feedback. Dr. Miller inspired me to strive for excellence.

Dr. Brown was a true Rock Star during the final weeks of this process. She picked up the torch and helped me carry it to the finish line in preparation for submission to The Graduate School. I will be forever grateful for her expertise and invaluable contributions to my work.

I must provide a special acknowledgment and thank you to my parents, Ken and Sue Fleisher. They have always been and continue to serve as an example of what honor, hard work, and perseverance look like. I worked and pushed myself to finish this dissertation so they could see me graduate. I could never repay you for what you have sacrificed for me, so I offer this completed dissertation as an honest attempt.

Look Dad, I finally finished my “paper!”

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Black students who persevered to overcome the obstacles in their path to their Freedom Dreams! I will forever admire those who have already won their battles and those who have yet to begin to fight because I will never know the challenges that they face as a person of color.

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CHAPTER ONE: SETTING THE STAGE

Background Information

My investment in the topic of school-dependent student access to advanced courses has both a personal component and a professional one. The personal investment has to do with the composition of my family. In 2015, my wife and I became foster parents. Our motivation for becoming foster parents was to provide a stable environment for a specific child, Angela. Angela had been in the foster care system since she was eight years old. We were her seventh home in those eight years. Our initial intention was focused on providing a stable home environment for Angela, so she could finish high school. Our family all fell in love with each other and ended up adopting Angela. My story is not meant to suggest that our experience as white foster parents and later adoptive parents of a young Black girl was perfect and devoid of challenges, but this experience was the beginning of what motivated me to write about the opportunity gap in advanced courses for Black high school students.

In 2016, Angela and JB, our daughter who is the same age as Angela, graduated from high school and went to college. Shortly thereafter, we became pseudo-foster parents to another young man, Tony, who was the same age as our youngest daughter, BB. We got to know Tony as a student during his freshman year when he was a student in my wife's Honors English I class. Beginning with his tenth-grade year, Tony would seek her advice regarding curriculum issues and what courses he should take while in high school and college.

I learned one night in December of 2017 that Tony was essentially homeless. Tony's nights were spent either sleeping on different friends' couches or floor spaces or in a hut-like structure in the woods behind our school. We talked to Tony and then alerted our school social worker so she could begin the McKinney-Vento process, which is a federal program

designed to provide support specifically for the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness (Subtitle VII-B of The McKinney-Vento Act, 2023). Then, we offered him a bed at our house for the remainder of his senior year. We provided housing for Tony during his senior year of high school. Tony was not officially part of the Children and Family Services system, although our school social worker had worked with him extensively. He was a young man, whom my wife and I both knew as a student. We did not provide a home for Tony in an official capacity, which is why I referred to us as “pseudo-foster parents” above. We invited him to stay with us while he finished his senior year of high school and for as long as needed to provide food, shelter, and support.

Tony is a bi-racial male who identifies as Black. My family’s experiences with Tony are also a driving factor in what led me to pursue this topic. I am personally connected, invested, and, more importantly, extremely passionate about closing the opportunity gap for Black students in advanced courses. I am committed as an educator to providing access to the full curriculum for all students. My lived experiences as a parent of white children, a school administrator, and foster and adoptive parent of Black teenagers have all provided different perspectives on how to shift the status quo enrollment practices in advanced high school courses.

My professional investment began in 2006 when I served as the assistant principal of curriculum and instruction. In this position, my primary duties included overseeing the instructional program and making curriculum decisions at Purple High School. My first task in the summer of 2006 was to use the data from test scores, grades, and teacher recommendations to determine the placement of students into the advanced courses track at our high school. While I was completing this work, I remember thinking that there was a

significant number of students who had asked to be placed in the advanced classes that did not qualify based on the criteria that I was given to use to make the decision. This was the moment professionally that I felt the need to upset the status quo and change the practice of how students were placed into the advanced courses at my high school. It became personal when my wife and I experienced the student and parent perspective as we were preparing for Angela's high school course registration. The idea to center a dissertation on this specific topic emerged while writing several different smaller papers for various courses. My overarching research topic is the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced courses in high school. Advanced courses are defined as honors-level courses, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and dual-enrollment courses. The purpose of my research for this project is to search for potential opportunity gaps for underrepresented students, specifically Black students.

This opening chapter highlights the basis for my research project. Each section of this chapter details the individual pieces that make up the initial framework for my research project. In the next section, I provide the details of the problem which my research addresses. I follow this section by presenting the research questions. I conclude this opening chapter with an outline of the organization of the overall project and conclusion.

The Problem

Countless times during my more than 27 years as an educator, I have heard that “education is the great equalizer” for school-dependent (Jackson, 2011) students—impoverished, at-risk, and underrepresented students. Does education truly provide an opportunity for equality for all students? The idea that education is the great equalizer means that every student has an equal opportunity to obtain the “American Dream” as a result of

their public school education. I recognize that in some situations for certain students, specific measures, strategies, and interventions are required to level or equalize the playing field, but is it even possible to create an equal educational environment for all students? Further, if education is the great equalizer, then this would mean that opportunities for growth, wealth, property, and social equality—The American Dream—are readily available to the same degree to all students and people as they move beyond their formal educational training.

I am curious how students who are enrolled in a regular education program who are underrepresented in specific courses and academic programs feel about the phrase, “education is the great equalizer?” For the purpose of this dissertation, underrepresented refers to students whose enrollment percentage in certain courses is significantly less than the percentage of those students within the population of the school. For example, if 30% of a school’s students identify as Black and the enrollment of Black students in advanced courses—honors level, dual-enrollment courses, and Advanced Placement (AP)—is only 10%, then Black students are underrepresented in advanced courses in this school.

I am interested in learning from underrepresented students, who have completed advanced courses while in high school, what the process was like for them to enroll in and complete these courses. I want to know about their experiences while in these courses and what benefits they gained as a result of completing these courses. Finally, I want to know what advice they have for other Black students who are seeking opportunities to enroll in advanced courses in high school.

Why should students and their families care whether or not a student is enrolled in advanced courses—honors level, dual-enrollment, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses—in high school? In other words, what are the benefits of enrolling in and successfully

completing such courses? What if a student does not plan to attend a four-year college or university—should that change the mindset? The central research question for this phase of the study is: What perceptions do Black high school students have regarding advanced courses (honors, AP, and CCP)?

Students seeking acceptance to their college or university of choice work and search for ways to gain an academic advantage in order to stand out in the *eyes* of college selection committees. High school students wanting to attend a four-year institution of higher learning know that the rigor of their high school course of study is a major factor in putting themselves in a favorable position for college acceptance. According to a Gallup Poll in 2004:

Faced with intense competition to get into good colleges, many high school students look for any advantage available to them beyond good grades in traditional classes. And they are well aware that university admissions departments look favorably on students who take honors and advanced placement (AP) courses. (Mason, 2004, p. 1)

This same poll revealed that half of the students ages 13 - 17 are enrolled in advanced courses, such as honors and AP (Mason, 2004). If the student plans to attend a four-year college or university after high school, then the number jumps to 62% (Mason, 2004). However, the bad news is that only 40% of non-white students enroll in these types of courses compared to 56% of their white counterparts, and counselors are less likely to encourage non-white students to take advanced courses (Mason, 2004). At Purple High School in Purple, NC, where I serve as one of the assistant principals, the racial make-up of the student body is 70% white and 30% non-white, while 43.3% are considered school-

dependent. However, in 2018 and 2019, white enrollment in AP courses was 77.9% and 79.1%, respectively, while enrollment was only 10.6% and 10.5% respectively. That is a surplus enrollment for white students of 7.9% and 9.1% for 2018 and 2019, but a deficit enrollment for non-white students in 2018 and 2019 of 19.4% and 19.5%. I have included a table below taken from an internal document from Purple High School (PHS). In this table, I am comparing the enrollment numbers of white students in AP and dual-enrollment courses through the community college College and Career Promise (CCP) program to the overall population of each group, including, in bold, any enrollment surpluses or deficits that exist for 2018 and 2019 (citation and reference withheld to maintain the confidentiality of the school and participants).

Table 1

PHS Advanced Courses Enrollment Numbers

PHS Enrollment	Percentage
PHS white Students	70%
PHS Black Students	20%
PHS Other Students	10%
2018 white AP Enrollment	77.9% (+7.9%)
CCP Enrollment	72.2% (+2.2%)

2018 Black AP Enrollment	10.6% (-9.4%)
CCP Enrollment	16.3% (-3.7%)
2018 Other AP Enrollment	11.5% (+1.5%)
CCP Enrollment	11.5% (+1.5%)
2019 white AP Enrollment	79.1% (+9.1%)
CCP Enrollment	72.2% (+2.2%)
2019 Black AP Enrollment	10.5% (-19.5%)
CCP Enrollment	16.3% (-13.7%)
2019 Other AP Enrollment	10.4% (+0.6%)
CCP Enrollment	11.5% (+1.5%)

These data show that a deficit in enrollment in advanced courses exists at PHS, but the problem is that this is not exclusive to PHS. This is a widespread educational problem, and it may be a part of the *hidden curriculum agenda* that needs attention in order to promote the enrollment of non-white students in honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and dual-enrollment classes in high school. In doing so, there could be a leveling of the playing field for non-white students competing for college admissions.

Research Questions

In order to better understand why racial discrepancies exist in the enrollment of students in advanced high school courses, I want to know what Black students think about advanced courses in high school. I want to know what their perceptions are regarding these

courses—including recruiting measures and strategies, retention tactics, and the benefits of taking these courses. I want to know the challenges and hurdles that they encounter to take these courses and, for those who qualify and do not enroll in these courses, I want to know why. The overarching question that drives this research is:

Why is there a disproportionately low number of Black students in advanced courses (i.e. AP, honors, and dual-enrollment) in high school?

This primary research question is the glue that ties three auxiliary research questions together, which are used to drive the different phases of this project. The sub-questions are as follows:

- *What perceptions do Black high school students have regarding advanced courses (honors, AP, and CCP courses)?*
- *What influences administrator and teacher decisions regarding student enrollment in advanced courses?*
- *How can we inform students, parents, and community stakeholders about the different high school advanced course options?*

As stated earlier, the directions I followed in this project were fluid and based on the data produced via the research.

Conclusion

The practice of exclusion that has long been woven into our educational system is still being perpetuated today through the continued use of marginalizing language and practices by educational leaders and the systems in which they operate. Stated another way, the challenge to overcome the opportunity gap is a formidable one for several reasons. Dominating educational structures have existed since the 1800s and are, therefore, solidly a part of the

educational landscape. Secondly, the task of changing how language is considered and used is always difficult when it has been the status quo for so long. Ultimately, lasting change requires a systemic change to disrupt enrollment practices for advanced courses in high school.

In the first section, I recount and expound upon the experiences of the student participants who contributed to this project. I present information that is beneficial to students, parents, teachers, educational leaders, and community members who are interested in shrinking the opportunity gap in advanced courses for Black high school students. In the next chapter, I include a detailed review of the literature and an overview of the roots of the problem. In Chapter Three, I provide information regarding the theoretical framework I used to inform my research followed by the methodology and methods I employed while conducting the research. In the context of my methodology, I outline the ethical concerns for my project and how I navigated these issues. I follow Chapter Four by delivering details from the focus group sessions with the participants. In this chapter, I tell the participants' stories and provide details of their lived experiences regarding their time in advanced courses in high school. Next in Chapter Five, I outline a community outreach event that was the actionable result of my research and data collection. This event provided an opportunity for Black students and their families to learn about advanced courses and how to navigate this piece of the educational process. Finally, I conclude this dissertation by showing the implications of my research for educational leaders, outlining the challenges and limitations of this project, and recommendations for future considerations should I or anyone else continue with this work.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE (CRITICAL RACE THEORY)

This review of the literature is centered on critical race approaches focused on the educational issue of the *hidden curriculum agenda* and *the opportunity gap* in advanced courses as a hegemonic device that continues to perpetuate a discourse of dominance for the power groups in society. This approach falls under the paradigm of social constructionism and the theoretical framework that shapes my perspective—critical theory. Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), is a critical theory that centers race in its analysis, seeks to challenge the dominant ideology, and strives to emancipate—all of which align perfectly with constructionism because both social constructionists and critical theorists believe that multiple realities exist and knowledge is constructed based on one’s lived experiences within each person’s own social contexts, such as religion, culture, and interests (Parker & Roberts, 2011).

In this chapter, I delve into various authors’ works, ideas, and approaches to the opportunity gap. I also cover gaps in the research and provide recommendations that are interwoven throughout the review.

I begin by providing a review of Critical Race Theory (CRT). In the literature review, I start with the roots of CRT followed by the laws, policies, and practices foundational to my research problem. In the final sections of this chapter, I analyze the biases and language used in perpetuating whiteness as property, the criticisms of AP courses, and the research that supports AP courses respectively. I conclude this chapter briefly summarizing the major points covered and previewing Chapter Three.

In each of the sections outlined above, I expound on the review of the literature to provide an in-depth look for a clear picture of the existing research centered on underrepresented students in advanced courses.

Roots of Critical Race Theory (CRT)

This is not an exhaustive list, but Donna Ford (1998), Tarek Grantham (Ford & Grantham, 2003), and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), all appear as the seminal authors for Critical Race Theory work. These are a few of the authors who are widely cited and have contributed research findings, specifically on equity and issues in schools surrounding gifted children. Bonner and Goings' (2019) work typically focuses on males, whereas the other writers mentioned have published works that include all genders and races. My experience thus far has proven that these authors usually write from a critical perspective and understand the importance of language context. In addition to the aforementioned authors, Shehla Burney (2012) has written an article on postcolonial theory that provides useful information. In addition to the names above, I have pulled significant information from the works of Alan Bryman (2004), Sharan Merriam (2002), bell hooks (1994), Bettina Love (2020), Yvette Jackson (2011), Evette Ewing (2018), and Django Paris (2019) to mention a few others. The previously mentioned authors, as well as a few others whose works I examine in this paper, understand that language and the context in which we use language can either create or mitigate destructive systems for Black students and members of society.

Language

I have learned that language plays a vital role in social constructs. The words that are chosen, how and when those words are used, and the context in which they are used all determine their meaning and the meaning of the situation, which can be directly related to the

concept of social justice and power dominance. Burney (2012) informs that “language, literature, and culture have played a major role in colonization making language and terminology specific and central to postcolonial inquiry” (p. 173). The ways and contexts in which we use language can change the meaning of a word. Paris (2019) writes, “Damage-centered research causes and contributes to ‘erasure’ and ‘deficiency-based’ naming in our fields. Naming is a foundational tactic of ongoing settler colonialism and the ways violent erasures through education is an expected part of this structure” (p. 219).

Researchers need to be mindful of the language they use when they embark on a study using CRT because if the researcher uses damage-centered names and language (Tuck, 2009; Paris, 2019), then they are actually causing more harm by tearing down and negating people of color, people who do not prescribe to or belong to the academy rather than providing an opportunity for improvement (Paris, 2019). Paris (2019) continues, “I am talking about names that I am sure most everyone would assume and accept are harmless...urban, minority, diverse, underserved, at-risk” (p. 219). These names perpetuate the beliefs of the superiority of white, middle-class ways of being at the expense of others. They perpetuate the notion that being different is *bad* and that “not white is deficient” (Paris, 2019, p. 218). I have learned to be cognizant of the language I use and diligent about checking the context in which my language appears in my own research and daily conversations to help promote a shift in language from damage-centered to desire-based. I have made a conscious decision to use Jackson’s (2011) phrase “school-dependent” instead of disadvantaged when possible, which is code used by the dominant groups for *poor* and *at-risk*. An example of a shift in language would be

abrogation means 'cancellation' or 'repealing,' but in postcolonial theory, it refers to the rejection of the concept that there is a standard or normative form of correct language and accent that stands in contrast to inferior dialects and accents, or forms of spoken language, which are 'peripheral' or marginal.

(Burney, 2012, p. 176)

Thus, language use can become a “means for transformation and liberation by the postcolonial writer to re-present oneself without the master’s tools" (Burney, 2012, p. 176). To give an idea of the importance of language, Burney (2012) presents a list of 43 terms or phrases specific to postcolonialism that shape and define the theory. Just as in any arena in life, many of these terms were originally borrowed and then contoured to the necessary meaning to accomplish the dominant group’s goal. It is important, for this study, that I present western colonizing ideas and protocols to show the depth and level of systemic oppression endured by those viewed as *lesser than*.

It was important that I briefly point out the role that language can play in the process of marginalizing Black students as language has always been and continues to be the basis for the laws, policies, and practices that create a two-tiered societal system. This same system transcends society as a whole and perpetuates the exclusion of Black students in educational settings. In the next section, I lay out a few prominent laws, policies, and practices that are used to diminish Black students within the educational system.

Educators and legislators have known since the beginning of education that students need to be pushed and challenged by the most rigorous curriculum of which they are capable. In 2003 The Commission on the High School Senior proposed that the college-preparatory track be the learning track for all students, not just the privileged few (Ndura et al., 2003). As

stated above, this is not a new revelation, The Committee of Ten proposed the college-preparatory track for all high school students in 1893 (Elliott & Robinson, 1894). The intent of legislation such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which successfully overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), was to provide opportunities for school integration leading to educational equality, regardless of a student's cultural background. While *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the following cases -- *Murray v. Maryland* (1936), *Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada* (1938)), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950)), and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma Board of Regents of Higher Education* (1950) -- did chip away at legal segregation, true change was slow and somewhat ineffective (Murray v. Maryland [Pearson], 169 MD. 478, 182A. 590 [1936]; Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada 305 U.S. 337[1938]; Sweat v. Painter, 339 U.S.629 [1950]; McLauren v. Oklahoma Board of Regents of Higher Education339 U.S.637 [1950] as cited in Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), it was ruled "... 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. . . ." (Johnson & Larwin, 2020, p. 3). Through the lack of a vision and sound planning on how to successfully implement the called changes moving forward, policies such as these caused more harm than good because segregation actually increased as a result of unfriendly and homogeneous systems created by school systems resistant to integration (Johnson & Larwin, 2020).

Policies and Practices

School systems can be rife with unwritten policies and rules that exist within the context of a controlling ideology that claims *it is what is* or *there isn't anything we can do about it* while fully knowing that the reality is a segregated or at least a mostly homogeneous school system. For example, Eve Ewing (2018) explains that one of the strategies that school

systems and policymakers employ to keep schools separate is that the school system and local government determine attendance zones or district lines that create the desired attendance zones. People tend to migrate to and live in neighborhoods with other families from the same culture or ethnicity, which leads to many neighborhoods made up primarily of whites or families of color. School districts can then create attendance zones that ensure the majority of a school is predominantly composed of white students or Black students in a manner very similar to the concept of gerrymandering used by politicians.

Housing and school attendance zones can create homogeneous schools, but the tax dollars that are funneled away from the schools due to low property values pummel these students and families almost like a cluster bomb from which there is no escape. The message from the dominating group seems to be—it is not enough to keep *you* out of *our* schools and neighborhoods, but we will persevere in denying you access to any amenities of the liberating system. This message has been received loud and clear by non-white families. In the South, there were separate and *UNE*qual schools that existed for more than 100 years after the Civil War while the system of de facto segregation often produced similar results in the North (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 105).

Legislation, policies, and secret covenants are not the only issues historically attributed to the problem of the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced classes. These issues outlined above lead to a lack of access to the advanced courses curriculum for Black students, which in turn leads to gaps in both opportunity and achievement.

Many of our nation's schools that are largely non-white do not offer honors or AP courses, nor do the schools or their feeder schools offer programs aimed to prepare students for gifted courses (Ford, 1998). Ladson-Billings (2013) adds, “even today almost 90% of

Black and Brown students attend hyper-segregated schools” (p. 106). Even in situations where diverse students are able to attend a school that offers advanced courses, their climb is not over.

Racially diverse students, like their white counterparts, need access to the challenging curriculum designed to prepare them for the academic rigors of college or university life. The earlier in their academic careers that students have access to gifted programs, the better their chances of growing in their educational experience. Students who show a lack of ability later in their schooling were most likely denied access to advanced and gifted classes early (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014). Ladson-Billings (2013) commented on the issue of non-white students not being recommended or placed in gifted programs many times by stating, “the patterns are so regular and so predictable that we have come to expect them” (p. 105).

Ladson-Billings (2013) tells us, “This discourse is about the pattern of underachievement that is extant among these groups of students” (p. 105). Race continues to be a factor in determining inequities in the U. S. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). U. S. society is based on property rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), which plays a major role in creating inequities for Black students. These inequities often lead to Black students being excluded from advanced and gifted programs or not attending schools offering such programs more often than white students. Therefore, their overall achievement tends to be lower than that of white students. The educational processes that support the dominant ideology marginalize and diminish Black students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This discrepancy in performance level has been called “the achievement gap” and is the “pattern that we have come to expect” (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 105) mentioned above. Ladson-

Billings (2006) re-defines the achievement gap as an achievement debt because a gap is not sufficient in explaining the damages incurred by the students and society when students are prevented from enrolling in advanced courses. Additionally, she shifts the language from gap to debt because "we slip into a discourse of individual or personal responsibility" for the "gap" when, in her mind, it is actually centuries in the making from structural inequities rather than individual students, teachers, parents or even schools (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 105). Unfortunately, denying students access to valuable resources, curricula, and programs proven to aid them in preparing for college has not been the only obstacle that Black students face.

In fact, occasionally, Black students must overcome being taught by teachers who are not adequately prepared to teach students who are culturally different. Also, Black students are sometimes placed in courses with an instructor who holds negative perceptions of them as I describe in the next section.

Teacher Perceptions and Preparation

Educators and educational leaders need to recognize how well prepared they are to educate students who are culturally different from them. The perceptions that an educator holds about culturally different students can have a significant impact on whether the students have a positive or negative educational experience. Consequently, the perceptions that educators have about their students affects whether or the student is recommended for and placed in gifted and advanced programs. Martin Jenkins wrote about the hindrances that Black students face regarding their recruitment and retention in 1936 and according to Ford (2014), these same students are still facing these hurdles.

I am not claiming that an educator’s perception of a student is separate from a student’s assessment scores. An educator’s perception of a student is based, at least in part, on that student’s performance on assessments—standardized, summative, and informative. In this section, I focus on teacher perceptions and preparation regarding non-whites because a teacher’s perception of their students—especially their non-white students—is the leading cause of low student performance since such perceptions maintain control by the ruling group (Johnson & Larwin, 2020). This claim is based on data from a study by Oakland and Rossen (2005) that showed when administrators are vetting students for gifted and talented programs that 25% of the decision is based on their aptitude, meaning that 75% is based upon factors outside of intelligence. Therefore, a teacher’s perception controls the overwhelming majority of the subjective decision on whether or not a student is placed in advanced courses.

When an educator has a negative perception of a student, the educator then thinks about the student in a negative manner, which Ford and Grantham (2003) call “deficit thinking” (p. 217). This means that the educator believes that the student is incapable of academic success and growth, which is to say they *assume* the student is incapable. Jackson (2011) calls this “prejudging of the intelligence” of students based on standardized tests, which led to battles in the courtroom (p. 15). I would add that it is easy to assume that some educators would then make the same negative assumptions about all students of that same cultural background. Ford and Grantham (2003) posit that there are eight different deficit thoughts that educators hold onto about non-white students. Some of those deficit thoughts include:

- Low intelligence—the teacher assumes the student is not intelligent
- Assessment—they cannot pass the test

- Policies and practices—teachers under-refer Black students (pp. 220-223)

I point out these deficit thoughts because they show a gap in how some teachers perceive their Black students, which adds to the enrollment gap. Researchers and educators need to keep an open mind and search for their own complicities to recognize when they are employing a deficit-thinking model. Below are several relevant questions for teachers:

- What are their perceptions of gifted students?
- How do they define giftedness?
- How do perceptions affect the referral of students for gifted programs?
- How culturally competent are teachers?
- What are their personal experiences working with culturally diverse populations?
- What stereotypes and misperceptions do they hold? (Ford & Grantham, 2003, p. 218)

Perceptions—negative and positive — about racial backgrounds influence the development of definitions, policies, and practices. Ford and Grantham (2003), point out, “Deficit thinking contributes to people’s beliefs about culture, race, and intelligence” (p. 218). Ford and Grantham, (2003) demonstrated how “*a priori* assumptions and fears associated with different racial groups, particularly African Americans, led to conscious fraud—dishonest and prejudicial research methods, deliberate miscalculations, convenient omissions, and data misinterpretations among scientists studying intelligence” (p. 218).

These researchers do not specifically state that they believe teachers need training and preparation focused on best practices for teaching culturally different students, but this research clearly shows that specific training to that end would be beneficial for teachers who have culturally different students in their classes to serve all of their students better. Vetting students for gifted and talented programs based on standardized assessments have shown that

25% is based on their aptitude, meaning 75% is based upon factors outside of intelligence (Oakland & Rossen, 2005). These data that Oakland and Rossen (2005) have brought to light underscore the fact that it is important for teachers to understand how to educate and interact with their culturally different students who are gifted. When teachers are sufficiently trained to educate culturally different students, then they are better able to cultivate the “non-cognitive factors such as grit, self-control, self-assurance, and mindsets toward ability and effort” (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014, p. 104). These characteristics should carry three times the weight than pure intelligence when considering a student for gifted and talented programs (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014). Additionally, if a student’s “economic, cultural, socioemotional, affective, and developmental needs are ignored, trivialized, or poorly addressed,” (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015, p. 192) then they are less likely to be successful. If a teacher is not properly trained on how to work with culturally different advanced students, then they are less likely to be able to properly identify and cultivate gifted students (Kim & Zabelina, 2015).

Classrooms are becoming more diverse; therefore, educational leaders must have an awareness of teacher perceptions of culturally diverse students and be ready to provide training for their teachers if necessary. According to the U.S. Department of Education, from the fall of 1976 to the fall of 2017, the percentage of Black students increased from 10% in 1976 to 14% in 2017. The 2017 percentage reflects a slight drop from the 2011 numbers when Black students made up 15% of all enrolled U.S. residents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The percentage of Black students in a specific classroom could be higher or lower depending on where a teacher is employed, but they would still need to be prepared for a diverse classroom. For example, in my district (Green County Schools, NC), a

teacher could be moved from one school to another and face a vastly different classroom landscape because the percentage of non-white students ranges from a low of 27 percent at Blue High School to a high of 61 percent at Red High School (Public School Review, 2021).

If educators hold negative perceptions of students who are culturally different from them and are not aware of this, then a divide between the educators and the students occurs. Once this divide between the teacher and student occurs, the deficit thinking model begins to take shape. Educators begin to believe that their students are lazy, uncaring, and not committed to their education or loyal to anything. Ladson-Billings (2013) offers,

these young people are not slackers who do not care about education. Quite the contrary, they desire to be deeply engaged in learning. But they do NOT [emphasis in original] want to receive a passive education where rote memorization and regulation pass for learning. They want to innovate, create, and implement. They are, as hip-hop science educator Christopher Emdin of Teachers College, Columbia University says, "science-minded," and as science-minded individuals, they want to "do" science rather than read about it. (p. 108)

This is another example proving why it is important for an educator to know as much as possible about the students whom they are charged to educate.

When the educators in a child's life build a positive rapport with them and develop a genuinely caring relationship with them, then deficit thinking is less likely to be a negatively contributing factor for referrals to gifted and honors programs. Additionally, the referral process for advanced courses can then shift from a test-based consideration to a process based on the whole child and their abilities.

Student Perceptions

White middle- and upper-class students, either on their own or by virtue of their parents, generally understand that there is intense competition to get into the college or university of their choice and that the college admissions teams want to see the successful completion of academically-rigorous courses—such as honors, AP, and dual enrollment—on their high school transcripts.

The image that students hold of themselves has a major effect on their academic choices and, consequently, their academic paths. In the next section, I outline findings that explain why students who might be considered capable academically hold negative perceptions about themselves and do not enroll in advanced courses. It seems to me, after extensive reading and conducting my own research, that many times Black students are the only Black student in an advanced course or one of only two or three even though they do not want to be the only student who looks like them in the class. When asked, many students express that they are sometimes uncomfortable taking these courses because they do not want to be the only non-white student in the class (Mason, 2004). I have learned over the course of my more than 27 years of experience as a high school educator that students want to be with their friends. Also, I have learned that students do not perform well academically when they feel isolated from their peers and the people with whom they identify.

When gifted students are different, they stand out compared to their peers, but non-white students stand out even more (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015). When a student of color is the only or only one of few students in an advanced course full of whites, then the *acting white* slur is more likely to come from their peers of the same racial and/or ethnic background, which in turn perpetuates the feelings of isolation, providing support for the

claims that Black students are at a greater risk of encountering microaggressions from their peers compared to their white counterparts (Stambaugh & Ford, 2015). I liken the microaggressions that Stambaugh and Ford (2015) described in their article to the deficit thinking model that Ford and Grantham (2003) described in their article because these are fundamentally the same concept called by different names.

The connection between these two ideas and a student's self-perception is that many students internalize deficit thinking, which can have a detrimental impact on their social, emotional, and psychological development (Ford & Grantham, 2003). When students feel microaggressions from their peers and teachers, they may transfer these actions into deficit thinking, which then leads to damaging internal thoughts and, ultimately, lower academic performance.

All students need to know that they have at least one adult at school whom they can trust and know is supportive of them. In other words, students thrive when they feel support and validation from the adults in their lives, including their teachers. But when they do not feel this, it is detrimental to their psychological development and, consequently, their academic development. Therefore, "one can conclude relations and self-perceptions are key to the academic success of students, in particular, African American male students" (Johnson & Larwin, 2020, p. 9). While students' self-perceptions are not the focus of this study it is an important idea to consider because it contributes to the students' overall perception of their lived experiences, which includes advanced courses.

In some schools, a student can self-nominate themselves for gifted and advanced programs, but many times the process and required forms are quite cumbersome and difficult to navigate and understand (Ford, 1998). Relegating students to advocate for themselves is

another way to segregate the elite classrooms in schools where the only alternatives are for them to meet the narrow selection criteria or be recommended by their teacher. The idea of self-nominating can be a great method for students to advocate for and take ownership of their education, but it can also be destructive. For example, if students run into issues with the forms or understanding the procedures, this could cause the student to have feelings of self-doubt—if they cannot even fill out the forms then how can they handle the rigors of the course? Consequently, students are forced to seek help from the people who refrained from referring or placing the student in the desired courses in the first place.

Generally, many Black students may be behind white students academically due to their lack of access, lack of support, external and internal perceptions, and educators' biases. Black students also lack support on many fronts that would enable them to take advantage of such courses, even if they attend a school that offers them. In a study conducted by Lewis and Connell (2005), Black students who were enrolled in advanced science courses were asked why they enrolled in the course and what their career plans included. The results showed that the “majority (55.17%) of African American students in this study gave the following reasons for enrolling in advanced courses was for career preparation, college preparation, or a desire to learn more” about a specific topic (Lewis & Connell, 2005, p. 225). The results of this study bolster claims that many students, especially those interested in attending an institution of higher learning, understand the advantages and need for having access to advanced courses—honors, AP, and dual enrollment—but their understanding does not equate to their access. Access is a problem created by biases and perceptions from educators and the design of the *system* itself, which then leads to the lack of opportunities for Black students and their families to learn how to navigate the system. The remainder of this

paper is dedicated to presenting the knowledge and material I gained from the conversations I had with the participants and I start with a discussion of biases and whiteness as property.

Bias: Whiteness and Property

If, as an educational researcher and leader, I genuinely want all students to have access to the best education possible, then I believe it is necessary to acknowledge that whiteness is equal to power and property (Capper, 2019). This concept is important because owning property equals participation in government and accords the property owner incredible power, privilege, status, and rights, often based on skin color (Capper, 2019).

The connection among whiteness, property, power, and school curriculum is that the latter is the most-valued property in schools. Since school funding is often based on property taxes, whites typically have control of the school curriculum because traditionally white neighborhoods have higher-valued homes than non-white neighborhoods. Consequently, whites tend to have better-funded schools and better curriculum options. Therefore, in many public schools, the curriculum became and has remained property that was and still is protected fiercely by those in power—middle and upper-class whites (Capper, 2019).

The AP curriculum has become white property due to the tracking that takes place within the school system (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). The practice of tracking places high-performing students in the advanced course track and low-achieving students in the regular or remedial tracks. Black students and school-dependent students are overrepresented in special education programs and at-risk programs, such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and remedial courses.

Bias: Identification and Referral

The use and implications of using standardized tests as the sole or predominant measure to determine student eligibility for gifted programs and advanced courses remain one of the most significant barriers for Black students. It seems as though the lone criterion measured for a child to have access to honors, AP, and dual enrollment courses is trending to a score on a standardized test. I understand to a certain extent that since “teacher input is incredibly subjective” (Ford, 1998, p. 9) schools and school districts would rely heavily, if not solely, on test scores. For instance, one common example of exclusion, which does not necessarily involve an intentional negative reference from the teacher, is that some children tend to be quiet and as not verbally participatory as others, which may lead to them being overlooked by the teacher (Ford, 1998).

However, one of the problems with exclusively using standardized assessments to determine eligibility for upper-level courses is that standardized tests are often biased and do not consider the “non-cognitive factors such as grit, self-control, self-assurance, and mindsets toward ability and effort” (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2014, p. 104). The dilemma is that to be able to consider these important factors, researchers and educational leaders, rely on teacher referrals. The problem with relying on teacher referrals means the process is now predominantly subjective. This can be a problem because some teachers harbor negative perceptions of Black students and some teachers lack the knowledge and training to educate Black students. This can put the student on an unsound foundation (Farkas & Duffet, 2009).

A second shortfall regarding teacher training is whether or not teachers are properly prepared in educating advanced and gifted students—the status quo is that most are not. In other words, it is not enough to be well-versed in understanding and educating culturally

different students alone. It is also necessary to be trained and have proper knowledge on how to identify and educate academically-gifted students if the entrance into such programs is reliant on the teacher's input.

The first argument regarding the problem with using standardized testing to identify Black students for advanced courses is that the tests are culturally biased. Test makers and the companies who produce such tests claim that the tests are "fair and impartial measures of academic performance and have become the most prevalent measures of the quality of educational programs" (Kim & Zabelina, 2015, p. 129). Regardless, there is little debate among experts and researchers who work with Black students that the tests are culturally biased because the tests are normed for the majority of those who take the test, which would be whites. Padilla and Borsato (2008) concluded that:

most tests are normed using the scores of majority group populations. It may be inappropriate to use the same assessments with individuals of various racial/ethnic minority groups without norming the instrument to reflect those groups. If the cultural or linguistic backgrounds of the individuals being tested are not adequately represented in the norming group, the validity and reliability of the test are questionable when used with such individuals. (p. 8)

While it is true that standardized tests are culturally biased, the fundamental problem is more complex than simply stating "those tests are culturally biased," which one will see in the next section.

Through research (that is supposedly under the guise of trying to make things better by understanding), using culturally biased names is tearing down and negating people of color, people who do not belong to the academy. Paris (2019) points out a few examples of

names that he is sure most everyone would assume and accept are harmless, such as “urban, minority, diverse, underserved, at-risk,” and “my personal favorite, non-white!” (p. 219). These names perpetuate the beliefs of the superiority of white, middle-class ways of being at the expense of others. Using names such as these also perpetuates the notion that being different is ‘bad’ and that “not white is deficient” (Paris, 2019, p. 218). Names such as these listed above contribute to the identification bias that Black students face.

Educational researchers have an array of theories and philosophical frameworks with which to use to challenge and problematize inequities in policies, systems, and practices. However, if the end goal is to shape the educational landscape so that all students have fair and equal access to all curricula, then it is worth taking on endeavors that can produce lasting change, rather than focusing on the immediate disappointment. One important aspect to consider when attempting to narrow the opportunity gap is to examine where the foundational problems lie—at home, within society, or both. In other words, a better question might be, which area needs to be addressed first to bring about lasting positive change? Having access alone to advanced curricula is not enough. Students also need access to the same societal benefits such as equal employment opportunities, equal pay, and affordable housing to name a few.

Cultural Bias

Educational researchers and leaders need to address the educational shortfalls and the systemic societal issues that students and families of color endure, such as individual biases and institutional racism normalized in educational, healthcare, financial, and justice systems (Banaji et al., 2021). Black people often do not feel the same level of security or benefits when interacting with law enforcement, loan officers, or healthcare professionals (Collins,

2020). The task of creating a shift toward a more socially-just society is very difficult because, while I do believe that the barriers are not always developed out of malice, the controlling class intentionally perpetuates measures that prohibit upward mobility opportunities for people of color. “American racial biases persist over time and permeate (a) institutional structures, (b) societal structures, (c) individual mental structures, (d) everyday interaction patterns” (Banaji et al., 2021). Systemic racism operates with or without intention and with or without awareness. If these issues are not challenged and changed, our students and families of color will continue without the education and training necessary to cope and advance as employees and citizens, which creates a snare that encircles marginalized people and dooms them to a sustained state of poverty.

In our nation's bigger cities, it is not a coincidence that the majority of our failing schools are in neighborhoods that are predominantly populated with people of color and upward economic mobility is the lowest (Love, 2020). Schools in neighborhoods such as these severely lack resources such as funding, access to curriculum, well-prepared teachers, and training for staff, and this leaves “dark folx criminalized, dehumanized, and disposable” (Love, 2020, p. 85). Reading this resonated with me and further solidified the need for a community outreach event, an event intended to address equitable access to advanced courses for more Black students and spark a shift to a more equal and socially just education system.

In the next section, I transition from cultural and identification biases to biases attributed to AP courses.

AP Course Critique

I have written a significant amount of material supporting AP courses as a viable curricular option for students who want to take a rigorous course of study in high school to put themselves in a good position for college admission. I have much experience as an educator—teacher and administrator—working with AP courses and the college board, students, and teachers regarding AP courses. Advanced Placement courses are an essential piece of the college preparatory program for high school students. However, I recognize that the AP program is not without flaws. It seems that there is a growing number of critics of the AP program who have been afforded the opportunity to express their criticisms publicly via the media and social media lately and I would like to address some of the significant points in opposition to the AP program as they relate to the claims that I make in my study that support the validity of the AP program. I give space to the opposition in the next section and follow with my counter-narrative.

Lack of Research Supporting AP Courses

Many of the harsh judgments toward AP courses stem from the fact that there is little research to support the notion that AP courses alone mean that a student will be successful in college. Geiser and Santelices (2004) argue against AP courses as a valid predictor of college success and they concluded that “while AP exam scores are strongly related to college performance... merely taking AP or other honors-level courses in high school is not a valid indicator of the likelihood that students will perform well in college” (p. 19).

Geiser and Santelices (2004) also argue that a push for schools to offer more AP courses and for students to take more AP courses is not necessarily good for the school or the

students. Geiser and Santelices (2004) make a good point regarding the dangers of pushing for a shift toward more AP courses:

a shift toward that end is problematic for a number of reasons: because some students, particularly underrepresented minority students, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, have less access to college-level courses; undue pressure is being put on schools to offer more college-level courses than they can realistically support; and perhaps most important, the predictive validity of course participation itself has never been established (p. 19)

These authors are short-sighted regarding the information they present because they only address AP courses.

Pope (Donald, 2013), examined whether or not AP courses improve learning in a school and if they positively impact a student's performance in college. She wrote a research paper that reviewed more than 20 studies on AP courses (Donald, 2013). Pope concluded that a major negative consequence of AP courses is that they contribute significantly to the destructive tracking of students where upper students—predominantly white, middle- and upper-class students—are placed in the upper courses, which leads to the likelihood of these students staying in the higher, more desirable curriculum track. Meanwhile, lower students—predominantly Black students and poverty-stricken students—are overrepresented in programs aimed at low-risk students such as special education classes, Response to Intervention (RtI) programs, and remedial courses (Donald, 2013). Pope says,

If you look at some programs, especially ones where AP students and non-AP students are in the same class but the AP students have extra coursework, the school can benefit. But if you look at others, where AP students are basically

in a school within a school – all of the high achievers in one place – then you’re not mixing it up with different kids. You’re not allowing students to learn from everyone, you’re isolating and giving, likely, better resources to a fewer number of students. AP classes will be smaller, for example, and they are often staffed by more experienced teachers. You could actually be creating more disparities in that kind of situation. (Donald, 2013)

To be fair, Pope is not claiming that AP courses are not beneficial, but at the same time, she is not praising the AP program. However, she is warning students and parents to be informed and intentional about their curriculum choices. Pope raises a few relevant concerns with the AP program.

The task of fighting for social justice and creating equal opportunities in schools is becoming more difficult. But, despite the recent condemnation of the AP program, there is plenty of research to show the positive outcomes of taking AP courses and I provide evidence of this support in the section below.

Support for AP Courses

I imagine that the denunciations of the AP program that I have outlined above are just the tip of the iceberg, but there is plenty of research that confirms the benefits of taking AP courses. In the statement above Geiser and Santelices (2004), are claiming that there is “no evidence showing that AP courses as a valid predictor of college success” (p. 19), but at the same time they concluded that “AP exam scores are strongly related to college performance” (p. 19). Their argument against AP courses rests solely on the idea that AP and honors courses alone are not predictive of success in college.

Camara and Michaelides (2005) recognize that “The relationship between the number of advanced-level courses and college grades may not be linear” (p. 3). They continue by asking, “is it reasonable to expect as much difference between a student with five such courses and a student with 10, as with a student with no such courses and a student with five?” (Camara & Michaleides, 2005, p. 3). They are referencing a study by Adelman, which is referenced in two other articles of which I have included the pertinent details below.

A study conducted on behalf of the US Department of Education (Adelman, 1999) found that the academic intensity of a student’s high school curriculum was highly predictive of college completion; in the study, the number of AP courses taken was one component of a composite variable representing the intensity of the high-school curriculum. Klopfenstein and Thomas (2006) write that “Adelman finds a rigorous high school curriculum, of which AP is one component, is an important factor in obtaining a bachelor’s degree. He does not find that AP participation alone contributes to bachelor completion” (p. 6).

Kretchmar and Farmer (2013) recounted Adelman’s 2006 study, where he recreated his study from 1999, but in the latter effort, he specifically investigated if there is a relationship between college success and the number of college-level courses that a student takes in high school. This study discovered that students who take five college-level courses in high school outperform students who do not take any college-level courses in high school. I have listed some interesting quantitative data from the study regarding college grade point average (GPA) comparisons among students and the number of college-level courses they completed in high school.

- The GPA for students who took zero college-level courses = 3.07
- The GPA for students who took five college-level courses = 3.26

- The GPA for students who took ten college-level courses = 3.25

According to Adelman's 2006 study, students who take some college-level courses while in high school clearly outperform students who do not take any college-level courses in high school (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013).

Access is the Key

The commonality among all of the disapprovals of AP courses that I listed above is that AP courses alone are not a solid predictor of college success. For example, Geiser and Santelices (2004) wrote "... AP or other honors-level courses in high school is not a valid indicator of the likelihood that students will perform well in college..." (p. 19). I agree that AP courses alone are not a solid indicator of whether or not a student will be successful in college. I have stated and vehemently believe that students should take a well-rounded and rigorous course of study that includes AP courses, honors-level courses, dual-enrollment courses, Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses, and electives that serve their interests. Geiser and Santelices (2004) needed to push their research an extra step and investigate the success of students in college who had access to and took a variety of courses in high school that represents the list above.

Pope spoke of AP courses only during her interview with Brooke Donald (2013). She did not include honors-level courses or dual-enrollment courses while condemning the AP program and seemingly advanced courses as a collective. One of the major points of her argument is that AP courses cause students to be tracked into an upper track or a lower track and this is a significant issue because of the divide tracking exacerbates between high-performing students and low-performing students (Donald, 2013). I agree that offering AP courses to high school students can create a registration system that can result in the tracking

of students, but this alone is not a sufficient reason to not offer all types of advanced courses to students in high school.

In this chapter, I highlighted a review of the literature on underrepresented students in advanced courses. I centered this literature review on CRT since this was the theoretical framework that I used in my research to disrupt the educational system that disenfranchises Black students. In this literature review, I considered the biases that some teachers hold about Black students as well as the biases that students harbor toward some teachers and the educational system. I also provided information regarding the current criticisms and movements in opposition to the AP curriculum. I used the knowledge I gained from this review of the literature to help me determine the best methodology to use for the data collection phase of this project.

In the next chapter, I describe the conceptual framework that informed my research, the methodology and methods used to collect the data, and my positionality in relation to my research project.

Conclusion

I understand the goal of Critical Theory is to gather information, understand the position or motivations of those in power, and challenge laws, policies, and unjust practices. I also understand that solving the problem is not necessarily the main goal of CRT, however, my goal for this project is to inform students, parents, and practitioners that there is a problem and to open the lines of communication for discourse that can lead to a shift toward a more equal and inclusive system with regard to how Black students are provided access to advanced courses in high school. In the next chapters, I present possible pathways for educational leaders to use to recognize potentially problematic enrollment practices in

advanced high school courses in their respective schools and some potential ways to close this gap or “reduce the debt” as described by Ladson-Billings (2013, p. 105).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study, I focused on the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, I have taken into account that I must consider how the lived experiences of the reader affect their decisions. St. Pierre (2000) argues that humanists find comfort and refuge in oppressive systems and imagined absolutes because they allow a person to avoid responsibility. We can place blame on some centered presence or a foundational principle, but this is irresponsible for anyone and especially for school leaders. Therefore, educators need to reflect and find the complicities in our decisions and actions that lead to oppressive policies and practices and shift from using phrases such as, 'it is what it is' or 'that's just the way things are' (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 484).

In this chapter, I describe the overall design of this research study and the methodology and associated methods used for this research project. Also, I have incorporated sections that address the ethical concerns of the specific study along with my positionality and reflexivity as a white male using CRT to disrupt an educational issue involving Black participants.

The participants are four Black students that have all graduated from high school. I focus on what the students know and perceive about advanced high school courses including: long and short-term benefits, retention, application, qualifications, reasons some students choose not to enroll in such courses even if qualified, and student experiences in these courses.

I included member checks throughout the research process. I employed a scaffolding method in how I released the data and information to the participants—meaning that I provided them with information in steps as I completed each phase of the data collection and

writing process. I recorded each of the individual interviews and shared the recording with the participant. The second method used to check for data validity was to give the participants access to the notes that I recorded from the interviews and recordings. The third way in which I ensured credible results was to share the written sections that pertain to each participant. Finally, the last measure I used was to provide the participants with full access to the writing.

I chose to capitalize Black throughout this dissertation to accentuate the intended purpose to promote, build up, and emancipate Black students from the oppressive educational practices and policies which they have long endured. At the same time, I use lowercase white in this manuscript to show that this project is about disrupting the colonizing ideology that permeates most facets of our educational system, which leads to the exclusion of Black students (Explaining AP style on Black and white, 2020).

Researcher Positionality

As an educational leader, I must be purposeful in the decisions that I make and the actions that I commit if I am to create opportunities instead of limitations for the Black students I serve. This research is valid because it provides a counter-narrative to the majoritarian narrative that continues to “favor those in control and leads to the unfair distribution of resources” (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013, p. 303). I have seen an unfair distribution of resources within a school firsthand as a father and as an educator, which is why it was important that I completed this research and report my findings to the educational community.

Ethical Concerns (Trustworthiness)

My position as a parent and administrator at the school in which the participants attended means that I must address the ethical concerns of my positionality for this project. I was an administrator while many of the participants were students and I am the parent of one of the participants, Angela. As mentioned above, one of the phases of this project focused on students' perceptions and experiences. Since Angela's experiences and story are woven into that section, it is important that I disclose this relationship and information to ensure I present an ethical research project. I had to show that Angela receives neither financial support nor living support of any kind for the ethics review board to approve this project. Further, I address the global issue of ethics and introduce the concept of me as the researcher as a part of the research in later sections.

I shifted between being an insider and an outsider throughout the research process. There was a power shift back and forth between the participants and myself as my role as the researcher moved from insider to outsider throughout this project. I anticipated this, which means I was purposeful in how I introduced the participants to this project and how I explained the intended purpose of this research.

I built in member checks by including the participants in all aspects of the research decision-making and provided full access to the research questions, notes, recordings, and documents before and during the process. As the originator of the project, I provided the starting point to begin these discussions. I met with the participants in-person and/or virtually for the focus group and individual meetings, whichever was more convenient. During the initial meetings, I explained my intended vision and purpose, introduced the broad research idea and question, provided the opportunity for each participant to give their input to add to

the vision, and developed our joint code of ethics to guide us for this project. It is important to note that all of the participants are high school graduates over the age of 18 and have agreed to participate in this project.

Research Project Design

This is a qualitative research project, consisting of individual interviews and focus group sessions with four Black participants who completed advanced courses during high school. My dissertation research consisted of two major elements: stories of the participants, and a community intervention program. Each phase has a common thread and purpose—recommendations for how educators may improve access for Black students in advanced courses in high school.

The first part of my research (Chapter Four) details the experiences and perceptions of four Black students while they were enrolled in advanced courses in high school.

The outcomes of that research indicated actions that I could take as a school administrator and led to the planning, execution, and results of a community outreach effort to present the information and data from these first two phases to students, parents, and community stakeholders. The purpose of this community outreach project is to educate families who would like to know how to overcome the barriers of access to advanced courses in high school for Black students. I include that project here as part of my dissertation work since it vividly illustrates what it means to question the status quo and work to challenge assumptions and biases through our agency and positionality.

The Participants and Methodology of the Study

I interviewed four former students regarding their experiences and background in gifted education programs in elementary and middle school and advanced courses in high

school with four of those students being Black. We met in groups of two or three for an initial meeting in which we discussed the parameters of the study, confidentiality, how the information would be stored and disseminated, and how we would handle unexpected occurrences. It was during this initial meeting that I reiterated the importance of their ability to not answer any questions which they did not want to answer and that they could withdraw from the project at any time.

We then created a space for the participants to add anything that I did not ask, but they felt was important to discuss as a part of a group. We then set up times for me to meet with each participant one-on-one. For part of my work in this project, I loosely followed a framework that Ford and Grantham (2003) completed while considering the perceptions and biases that educators exhibit with Black students in their classes—specifically gifted programs.

As I began the data collection, it was important that I kept in mind the knowledge gained from reading Ford and Grantham (2003), the consideration that students are school-dependent (Jackson, 2011), and similar ideas. My goal was to create a genuine space for young adults whom I interviewed to openly and comfortably share as much or as little of their experiences and perceptions as students in advanced courses as they wished. I believe that together we were able to accomplish this goal.

Qualitative Research

This is a collaborative project with former students and the reader will notice that this is decidedly a qualitative research study based on Critical Theory. I learned about the lived experiences of the participants through focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires. It was very important to me that I avoid describing the participants and retelling their stories in a

way that continues to marginalize them, which Tuck (2009) calls “damage-centered research” (p. 409). I chose to allow the data to develop naturally and drive the direction of the project by focusing on their victories.

I used Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to inform my methodology, which strengthened my research project and grounded my work to show how exclusionary enrollment practices in high schools limit opportunities for Black high school students.

Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) was borne from Critical Legal Studies, which is a critical theory used specifically to challenge legal matters, whereas CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) is a critical theory that centers race in its analysis and uses a critical approach to the question and investigate matters of race. Critical Race Theory challenges and deconstructs oppressive practices, policies, and laws (Parker & Roberts, 2011). The end goal of CRT is to promote social justice (Parker & Roberts, 2011) by using the data results of the research project to engage in critical dialogue aimed at promoting that end. Critical theorists and Critical Race Theorists alike believe in multiple realities and that knowledge is constructed, which shows that this research aligned perfectly with the social constructionism paradigm.

One of the reasons that I committed to allowing the research to develop organically and drive the project as a whole is due to adhering to the idea of learning about the lived experiences of the participants from their perspective by “seeing through the eyes of the researched” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). At the same time, I committed my efforts to a “limited structured process” (Bryman, 2004, p. 282) design because this is also a characteristic of a sound qualitative research study. These are important characteristics because the social world

is different from the natural world and produces a different context; having a limited structure allows for shifts in the research process within a fluid environment (Bryman, 2004). Merriam (2002) writes that the “researcher as an instrument within the research process” is an important feature of a trustworthy qualitative research study so the researcher can be “immediately responsive, adapt as necessary, expand the process, and check the accuracy of the information” (p. 5).

These concepts and practices of qualitative inquiry from Bryman (2004) and Merriam (2002) are constructionist, because they rely on a constructed reality and knowledge that is developed from lived experiences within the context of a research project. They also help show that the researcher can play an important role in the research process, which was true for me in this project. Referring back to the main goal of constructionism as *understanding our lived experiences*, it is necessary for the researcher to be an integral part of the research in order to best accomplish this objective because the researcher is connected to the topic and research in a constructivist qualitative study. It is also true that I am connected to this topic, in particular the participants. The methodology was driven by the topic and developed as the participants and I traversed the literature and research; also, the methodology aligns with my paradigm because it is part of the philosophical fabric of the project.

Methodology

The goal of critical educational research is not merely to explain or understand something in society, but to change it (Patton, 2002). Critical theory is critical of both positivism and interpretivism because they are regarded to be “enmeshed in dominant ideology...neither has an interest in changing the world, and neither has an emancipatory goal” (Scott & Usher, 2010, p. 35). The epistemology of critical theory is subjective,

meaning that no object can be researched without being affected by the researcher. I agree with this wholeheartedly, and, while believing that critical research has its place, I also agree that all knowledge and knowledge-seeking should be approached with questions and doubt (Bodner, 1986). I used CRT for my study because it is derived from critical theory, which is an excellent approach to inform research for an educational leader since the goal is liberatory change.

Addressing My Whiteness: Positionality and Reflexivity

I address my positionality relative to my reflexivity in the following section and why it is essential and appropriate for me, a white middle-class male, to use CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to research underrepresented students. My positionality in this work represents my assumptions and what I know about CRT, the participants, myself, and the educational system I am trying to disrupt. My reflexivity represents what I think and do with the knowledge and experiences from my research.

I acknowledge that, as a white middle-class father and a K-12 administrator, I embody whiteness and all of the destruction that whiteness represents to people of color. I also acknowledge that I am afforded certain privileges because I am white (Capper, 2019). Stated another way, I do not have to overcome my race like people of color must in many situations. Nonetheless, I also recognize that being white does not automatically mean that I am unfit to research the opportunity gap for underrepresented students. Being white does not preclude me from investigating laws, policies, and systems through a CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) lens to examine the equity of these laws, policies, and procedures. I am fit for the research and work that I have outlined in this dissertation because I have a unique perspective as an administrator and a father of a Black female. However, I have taken into

account my whiteness and used some of the techniques revealed below to counteract my blind spots.

My being white means that I need to be very cognizant of my whiteness and what it means relative to the people of color whom I interview as a researcher and those whom I serve as an educational leader. Furthermore, my being a white middle-class male also means that I must be fully aware of my positionality—assumptions and beliefs — and my reflexivity—what I choose to do with the information gained from the research. I believe it is my obligation to be a good steward of this knowledge.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated the major components of the conceptual framework that informed my research and detailed the methodology and methods used to collect the data for this research study. As a part of this writing, I expounded on my whiteness and how this informed my positionality and reflexivity relative to this study. Also, I also addressed the ethical concerns that presented as a result of conducting research with participants whom I know well.

In the following chapter, I introduce the participants and their backgrounds. I present their lived experiences and perceptions regarding advanced courses in high school. One of the results of this data collection phase of my project was a community outreach event. This outreach event served as an opportunity for Black students and their families to learn how to navigate the educational system. I reveal the full details of this event in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS FROM STUDENT EXPERIENCES

In this chapter, I present the stories of four underrepresented Black students who took advanced courses during high school. I summarize the experiences and perceptions of Black students who enrolled in and completed advanced courses while in high school, which provides knowledge that can lead to discourse focused on breaking the cycle and hegemonic system that sustain the status quo of excluding Black students from advanced courses. Educational researchers will be able to use this knowledge to further their own research and educational leaders can learn what they need to do to lead an inclusive staff and school. I start by introducing each of the participants in my study.

Meet the Participants

Four former students agreed to be participants in my study—two males and two females. The focus of this section is to present the perceptions and experiences of Black students in advanced courses. All of the young adults identify as Black and are graduates of Purple High School in Purple, NC. The study participants are all over 18 years old, have completed some college courses or have graduated from college, and are now working or still enrolled in college.

Angela

The first participant I met with was a 24-year-old female who graduated from a state university with a bachelor's degree in December 2020 with a Bachelor's Degree in Theater. She is currently working as an assistant personal trainer and assistant manager of a gym that is near her apartment while she completes her personal trainer certification.

Angela is the reason for the personal connection that motivated me to choose this topic for my project and this section because Angela is my daughter. Angela came to live

with us as a foster child—an emergency type of situation because social services and her case manager were about to make Angela leave Purple High School (PHS).

Angela was living with a foster family in a different school zone within our school district, which is made up of four zones that feed into four high schools. Angela was living with a family living in a nearby school attendance zone, but she was allowed to continue attending PHS, which she attended prior to moving with this family. The foster parents agreed to provide reliable and consistent transportation to and from PHS when they agreed to have Angela live with them. However, the foster family did not provide consistent on-time transportation and Angela was tardy and absent several times. Angela and our middle biological daughter, JB, were friends and were in several classes together at the time. JB had invited Angela to our house on several occasions, so while we did not know Angela well nor did we know much about her prior to her moving in with us we did know her. JB came home one day and asked us if Angela could move in with us because Angela was going to be “kicked out of PHS” and maybe even her current foster home.

My wife and I do not believe that JB fully understood what she was asking of us. We already had three children and all of them were teenagers at the time. We had a son who was a 19-year-old freshman in college, JB who was a 16-year-old Junior at PHS, and JJ who was a 14-year-old freshman at PHS. These children already presented their own responsibilities for my wife and me and JB was now asking us to take in an additional teenager who was entering her seventh home in less than 10 years. However, despite our hesitation, we contacted Angela’s case manager to set up a meeting after a phone conversation to discuss the prospect of becoming certified foster parents and bringing Angela into our home. We completed the process to become foster parents, the Good County Department of Social

Services placed Angela in our care, and we ultimately became her legal parents when the adoption was finalized on December 31, 2015.

I have chosen to use my daughter as one of the participants for my research project because she is the reason I am personally invested in this research. Prior to beginning my research, I knew that this relationship could pose some issues for me in more ways than one. I knew that I had several issues to consider to conduct a sound, valid, and reliable qualitative research study. I addressed these issues with the ethics review board while also establishing a clear set of guidelines designed to protect Angela and my project. I chose to include Angela's story because it is a valuable story that is rich with experiences and provides great detail to support my study. I am also personally invested and motivated to complete this project in large part due to my opportunity and privilege to be her father.

As an educational leader and researcher, I am invested in this research professionally, but having a personal connection to a research project is a more compelling motivator. Angela coming to live with us gave me the opportunity to see the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced courses through a father's lens. This view serves as the motivation and perspective necessary to conduct fresh and new research. Although I have access to their full academic records, I chose not to review transcripts at any point to provide a safe space for the participants to speak genuinely and freely about their experiences in these courses to maintain the organic outflow of this process.

When Angela first came to live with us my wife and I asked her what her future goals and plans were beyond high school and without hesitation she told us that she really wanted to go to college. However, she always thought that was not possible and would go into the military. Angela wanted to go to college because she believed that education was one of the

keys to bettering oneself, gaining access to a better job, and breaking the cycle of poverty that is generational for her family. Angela told us she did not think she was smart enough nor did she know where to start to be able to go to college. She confided that she had always believed that college was an impossible dream to realize.

After much discussion, we outlined a path to college for her. We then asked one final question, “Are you willing to commit to the hard work, consistency, and perseverance it is going to take to make this unlikely dream a reality?” We assured her that we would be there to help her and guide her when needed, but that she had to do the work. She was a little surprised that we could see a way for her to go college. We were willing to help her navigate the course, but once she understood that we were serious, she was on board. In the months immediately following this conversation, there were a lot of anxious moments for us and Angela as we outlined a plan for her course schedule that would put her in the best position possible to be accepted into an institution of higher learning.

Angela was nervous about taking honors, dual-enrollment, and AP courses due to not having been in classes like these before and hearing from friends that she would “be by herself” in these classes. As an educational leader, I was aware that our enrollment numbers in advanced courses did not match our overall school enrollment demographics. Hearing this from a student who was also living with us solidified that there is an opportunity gap. I also realized that the negative repercussions from a system that marginalizes Black students is more far reaching than I realized. This may not have been *the* moment in which I knew it was imperative to do this research, but this was certainly one of the pivotal moments in this process for me.

I do not claim that every moment, or even every day, was smooth for us as we navigated our way through learning to be good foster parents *and* guiding Angela to a successful high school academic experience, but we all learned much from our mutual experiences. I try to apply these lessons to my life as an administrator and educational researcher.

Angela could not remember for certain if she was identified as academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) in elementary school, but she assumed that she was not. As I alluded to above, Angela had only been enrolled in the basic and minimum required core courses prior to coming to live with us. Therefore, when we pushed her and the school to enroll in her first advanced courses, she was anxious. She doubted herself, but we learned very quickly that she is an intrinsically motivated person and that drive would propel her to put forth the necessary effort to be successful. It is important to note that success looks very different for each person, so we constantly reminded Angela that success was simply her doing her best and completing every assignment. My wife and I convinced her that if she could do those two things, then good grades and mastery of the content would follow. Angela is quick to point out that her life has not always been smooth. She allows herself an appropriate amount of grace and is confident that she has proven herself to be an example of success thus far. Angela is essentially a first-generation college graduate considering her biological family history. She is doing well in her full-time job and is pursuing a career in acting.

KB

The next participant is KB, a female who graduated from PHS in 2021. She is currently a sophomore at a state university where she is studying to be a middle school English teacher.

KB was initially inspired by her Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature teacher to teach high school. After working a summer camp with middle schoolers, she is confident that middle school is her calling. KB is very intelligent, very aware of herself and people. She was very honest when describing her experiences during our meetings. I know KB as a former student and I know that she is and will continue to be a leader, asset, and an influencer in every situation she is involved in.

KB remembers being identified as AIG as early as it started in elementary school. She mentioned that in middle school she was given the choice by the school whether or not she wanted to continue being served as an AIG student. It was not truly a choice, because her mom was insistent that she remain in the gifted program. Due to her enrollment in the AIG program throughout elementary and middle school and based on her grades and test scores in eighth grade, she was an automatic qualifier for the honors program as an incoming freshman at PHS. This meant that she was automatically scheduled for Honors courses entering PHS (i.e. English, world history, science, and math). We did not discuss the specific courses that she took in her ninth and tenth-grade years.

KB noted that during the registration process for her eleventh and twelfth-grade years, she met with her counselor and was supposed to take her registration sheet to get her mother's signature as a sign of approval and support from her mother. However, KB shared that her mother never signed her sheet. Therefore, KB could have registered for anything she

wanted and forged her mother's signature, but KB also knew what her mom's expectations were and that she needed to register for a rigorous course of study. During our one-on-one meeting, KB reflected on her experience and realized that this was her mom's way of allowing her personal choices in the courses in which she enrolled, based on her interests. KB also understood that giving her choices was one of the techniques that her mom used to build trust with KB. KB talked in detail about feeling like she was more mature than most of her peers throughout her entire academic career. Her mom allowed KB to have a lot of autonomy regarding course registration and KB believes that this is one aspect of her mom's parenting that helped her mature more completely and quickly than her fellow students. This also fits with the narrative that her mother always put education first. KB and I talked about the aforementioned concept of education being the great equalizer and KB believes that her mother definitely believes it, which is why she made KB's education a priority.

KB comes from a single-parent home being raised by her mother for most of her life. Her mom later remarried. She also indicated that her grandmother has always been an integral part of her life. KB said that her mother and grandmother are both strong women and they taught her how to be a strong Black woman in today's world. This piece of KB's story connects my research to the literature that I have reviewed and shows that this project is relevant to equity-based initiatives. It is interesting that KB, a black woman, framed this part of her lived experiences in this manner. In other words, I interpret her point to be that she had to be taught how to survive and thrive, as a Black woman, in a white patriarchal colonized society. KB experienced some tough love during these lessons but was quick to note that she knows without a doubt that she is fully supported by both women and they "have her back" (KB, personal communication, July 21, 2022) any time she needs them. Even though her

stepfather does not provide a major influence on her educational decisions, he has been present, involved, and supportive. Reflecting, she has felt like she comes from a two-parent family. KB is not a first-generation college graduate. Although her mother did not follow the traditional path to college by attending immediately following high school, she successfully earned a bachelor's degree and serves as a social services professional.

Tony

Tony comes from a single-parent household. He does not know his father. His mother was at best absent and only occasionally a present positive influence in his life. Tony labeled himself a couch surfer, moving from couch to couch at friends' houses trying not to outstay his welcome at any one place. On the nights when Tony could not find a friend to stay with, he would stay in a shack in the woods behind the high school. I will forever remember watching Tony walk into the woods after a home swim meet.

I was the administrator on duty working the home basketball game and swim meet when I saw a student walk into the woods. I honestly did not think much about it, because I did not assume the student was planning to sleep in the woods on a December night. However, I suppose I thought a little about the situation, because I asked around to see who the student was. My suspicion that it was Tony was confirmed, so I called Tony into my office the next day and asked him what he was doing walking into the woods the night before. He told me that he slept there when he could not find a place to crash. I immediately informed him that he would not be doing that anymore and that he was to ride home with me after practice that night. Tony was declared homeless during his senior year of high school and received support through the McKinney-Vento Act. I then had a conversation with my wife and the social worker, which is how he ended up receiving support through the

McKinney-Vento Act. He then moved in with us for the remainder of his senior year of high school. Tony readily admits that he is certainly an example of the adage *it takes a village to raise a child* because he received help and strength from multiple sources as he completed his final year of high school, including housing.

Tony recalled being a part of AIG when he was in elementary school and he quickly remembered “a big math test” in fifth or sixth grade. He commented that his teachers made a big deal about this math test. Upon reflection, he now understands that this math test helped determine his math pathway from that point through high school. He also recalls feeling the pressure that he would be seen as a failure if his score was not high enough to place him in the advanced math track. Tony explained that he recognizes he was part of a system that was not built for him. However, he also recognizes that the teachers who were a part of this same *system* were, ironically, the ones who provided support and the necessary resources for him to be successful in high school. Tony is a first-generation college graduate, the recipient of the 2018 National ACE Award. He has also benefited from the North Carolina College Promise Program.

TB

TB is 22 years old and identifies as a Black male. He graduated from a state university with a bachelor’s degree. He is currently studying for the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and his goal is to become a surgeon. TB was not identified and automatically placed in the AIG program in elementary school.

TB distinctly remembers his fourth-grade teacher advocating for him to his mom and the school administration. He recalled the teacher making a home visit to discuss the advantages and process of pushing for AIG placement with his mom. TB was placed in the

AIG program during his fifth-grade year. TB shared that one of his elementary teachers wanted to hold him back because they thought he had a learning disability. TB does not recall the reason why the teacher wanted to hold him back, but he believes it was because he “struggled to express his thoughts and ideas coherently due to his brain working faster than his mouth could keep up” (TB, personal communication, November 8, 2022). He remembers taking the math placement test at the end of sixth grade and automatically qualifying for the AIG program in middle school and the honors program in high school when he transitioned to PHS from Purple Middle School.

TB has always been motivated by grades, having the best Grade Point Average (GPA), and achieving the highest class ranking possible. Therefore, choosing to enroll in advanced courses was an easy decision for him. He shared that he was responsible for making his own scheduling decisions. Since he was an automatic qualifier for the honors program upon entering high school, he did not encounter much resistance to enrolling in advanced courses. He knew that the most rigorous course of study would put him in the best position to have choices regarding where he went to college. TB expressed that while he did not encounter some of the obstacles that some of his classmates mentioned he did share some of the same experiences, which I include in the next section.

I detail specific experiences and perceptions regarding the process of enrolling in advanced courses, their experiences in the courses, and teachers’ culpability in how Black students feel about these courses and the process in the following sections.

Students’ Perceptions and Experiences

One aspect of the focus group and individual meetings that did not surprise me was that there were several common themes that the participants discussed about their

experiences and perceptions regarding their advanced high school courses. I was looking for common themes that would emerge from my research. I was also searching for common themes from my research that aligns with the perceptions and experiences outlined in the literature review. I was excited about the new information that I learned from my research during the focus groups, because the participants shared more as their conversations grew deeper. It was a privilege to witness these young people being open and honest about their experiences and feelings regarding these courses and other obstacles in general. In the next section, I present the common themes from our conversations, the new information they shared with me, and how these both relate to and differ from previous research on the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced courses.

Common Themes

I was able to compile several universal ideas from the information gained during the focus groups and individual interviews with the participants. I have organized these common themes into the following categories—benefits from taking advanced courses, peer comments, micro and macro aggressions levied by the system and teachers, and advice. These central ideas represent commonalities and overlaps in the information provided by the participants during our meetings. I present the concepts that were the same among the participants and then present the ideas that were not as common or were unique to each participant.

Benefits of AP Courses

There are tangible and intangible benefits for students who successfully complete advanced courses while in high school. Geisler and Santelices (2004) reported that AP test scores are better than any other measured factor, except high school grades, to predict college

sophomores' GPAs (Scott et al., 2010). My experience shows me that while many students, educators, and parents are aware of the connections between advanced courses and success in college, a significant portion of Black students and parents do not know this. Additionally, my observations show that Black students and families do not know how to access or navigate the educational system that inherently marginalizes and excludes them. Therefore, the deficit cycle repeats itself.

While experts such as Geiser and Santilices (2004) and McCauley (2007) agree that the AP program (i.e. the standardized assessments, recruiting, and acceptance into courses) is not devoid of issues, McCauley (2007) also concluded that AP courses are still a significant predictor of who is likely to graduate from a four-year institution. Consequently, the advantages outweigh the critical problems associated with the program (Scott et al., 2010). Furthermore, the overall performance of the school should rise if educators hold all students to high expectations and provide support for all students to meet these high expectations. Stated another way, once the barriers that hinder Black students from equal access to the full curriculum are removed, then that particular group of students will experience growth academically. This then leads to overall growth for the school. (Jackson, 2011). I discovered overlap regarding the benefits of advanced courses that the participants listed and the benefits outlined from other research. I condensed the common benefits that appeared in the data using a simple color-coding system to identify overlapping ideas from multiple participants. Participants from this study shared that taking advanced courses helped them:

- Prepare for the expectations and workload of college
- Further develop academic responsibility and maturity
- Develop time management skills

- Learn how to work autonomously effectively and sufficiently
- Develop the ability to handle the pressures of college
- Learn how to handle the “extra” expectations
- Learn how to study because they could no longer get by with “just memorizing”
- Prepare for the rigors of college

There were two intriguing comments from the participants that stood out to me because of their deep understanding of and ability to reconcile their lived experiences. The first one came from Tony, “These courses helped teach me that this was probably not the end of this type of environment or treatment in my academic career” (Tony, personal communication, September 11, 2022). Tony was trying to explain that the negative environments and microaggressions from peers and teachers, while he was a student in advanced courses in high school, would probably continue beyond high school. In other words, he was resolved that he would continue to be subjected to inequitable educational experiences.

The second intriguing comment regarding the benefits of taking advanced courses in high school is attributed to TB, “taking courses such as these isn’t just for the student who plans to go to college, these courses can be beneficial to any student because it can help make for a better-educated society, therefore, hopefully, a better overall society” (TB, personal communication, November 8, 2022). TB’s point is that he believes that a better overall educated society is better prepared to vote and is more likely to create a more socially just society. One of the ways in which society benefits is if more students (i.e. not just more whites, but specifically Black students) are prepared for the rigors of college is lower remediation costs and higher retention rates for colleges and universities (Hoffman, 2003).

There are also societal and personal benefits when students traverse rigorous academic schedules in high school, whether the student attends college or not.

When challenged academically to their fullest potential, in addition to increased readiness for a four-year college or university, students are better prepared for community college, the workforce, and citizenship in general, which all help to create an overall better society. One more benefit, even if the student does not attend a four-year program, is better school accountability performance, which means the school is more likely to retain funding and be less of a drain on state resources (Hoffman, 2003).

Even though it is clear that there are many benefits from taking advanced courses for *many* students, these benefits outweigh any negative experiences that Black students might have in these courses. There are some obstacles and negative experiences for Black students to overcome. In the next two sections, I detail some of these negative perceptions and experiences that Black students experience in advanced courses in high school.

Negative Experiences in AP Courses

In this section, I focus on what the participants experienced from their peers in these courses. This is an important piece of this research because teenagers can be heavily influenced by their peers with regard to how they feel mentally and emotionally. If a student is not at their best mentally, then obviously their ability to perform in school is negatively affected. The following are comments and actions that the participants in this study were subjected to from some of their peers in some of their advanced courses:

- You are going to hell for being Black.
- You are very aggressive and hostile.
- You need to support your answers when you speak up in class.

- What do you think since you're Black??
- You are just trying to be white, why are you in here?
- Are you not proud of being Black? If so, then why are you here?

It is hard to imagine, for someone who has never had to endure treatment such as this and that comments like these actually happen. Unfortunately, I have learned through the review of the literature and my own research that comments such as these are more commonplace than they should be.

Tony won a prestigious local scholarship his senior year that many of the top-ranked students in his senior class competed for. He recalled one of the white students telling him that the only reason he won was that he was Black. He still feels a little hurt when he remembers this incident. He now chooses to believe that it is fine if being Black gave him an advantage in winning this scholarship because he probably overcame more to be in a position to compete for this award. This allows him to feel a great sense of accomplishment. If a teenager is suffering from problems as a result of peer relations, then they are not as likely to perform at their best in school. Adolescents who feel connected and safe at school report better overall health (Patalay et al., 2019; Van Ryzin et al., 2009), as do adolescents who perceive their school to be inclusive (László et al., 2019). Students who are subjected to and forced to endure such treatment as I have listed above do not feel included and accepted.

One common experience that every participant listed was that they were either one of only a couple of Black students in their advanced courses or they were the only students of color in the course. This was especially true considering these students' intersectionality—meaning that being a female or being a male in a course further isolated them. For example, Angela and KB both shared that while it was not this way in every course, but several times

there were as few as three Black students in a course and they were the only female. TB and Tony both said that they experienced the same situation as being the only male in a course a few times, but there were one or two Black females in the course with them. TB joked that for most of his junior and senior years that there were three or four Black students in the same classes together, since they were the only Black students in their age group taking advanced courses. TB quickly followed this comment with, “I said we joked about it, but it is really not a joke that we were the only Black kids taking these classes” (TB, personal communication, November 8, 2022). Black students not only experience derogatory comments from their peers, but they also experience such treatment from their teachers occasionally.

My research shows that Black students hold certain perceptions regarding the advanced courses and the experiences that they had while taking those courses. Some of these perceptions are positive and some are negative. The negative experiences usually stemmed from comments and treatment from their white classmates. One of the more common slurs that Black students report hearing is that they are compared to white students. Black students are questioned for trying to be white when they are in advanced courses and do not conform to the dumb jock or angry Black female narrative. Comments and attitudes such as these are additional examples of deficit thinking and contribute to low self-esteem and negative thinking from the students about themselves. The fact that other researchers (Capper, 2019; Ladson & Billings, 1995; Paris, 2019) have reported on the concept of negative perceptions of Black students coupled with the findings of my research shows that there is a significant gap between how Black students are viewed and how white students are viewed.

Biases range in depth from passive microaggressions, such as the language issues mentioned above, to overt, public, and aggressive comments and treatment from educators during classes in which students attend. Every one of my participants had plenty to talk about regarding their experiences and how they were treated by teachers and peers in many of their courses. I provide the details of these conversations regarding bias in the following section.

Micro and Macro Aggressions Levied by the System and Teachers

The participants all described various types and examples of microaggressions, which they experienced in some of their advanced courses and were a result of direct or indirect actions from teachers. Some of the direct actions that were common experiences among all of the participants include:

- You are in honors, so you should know better.
- I expected more from you since you think you are smart.
- Teachers who admonished only Black students for certain actions.
- Teachers who blatantly ignored Black students during class discussions.

The participants attributed any indirect microaggressions that they may have experienced to the classroom environment. The participants described incidents ranging from simply not feeling comfortable in a particular class to the materials and decorations hung on the walls. An example of the latter is a teacher displaying only white historical figures. KB said that high school is when she felt that she experienced racism for the first time. She mentioned that in some classrooms the displays of exclusions were overt, but in many cases, it was more subtle. She believed that she had to be “twice as good” as her white peers (KB, personal communication, Jul 11, 2022) and she was not allowed to struggle without feeling like she did not belong in these courses. She saw her white counterparts making mistakes and

the teacher did not say anything to them, but she would receive a comment or a look of disapproval from the teacher for similar mistakes. Tony Feels like he was shut down or even shut out by some teachers. He describes the experience as being ignored as if his ideas and opinions did not matter. He pointed out that while the teacher did not say or do anything overtly damaging, the microaggression came in the form of inaction. Tony reported that he remembers one specific course in which some of his classmates would make derogatory and racial comments, but the teacher would not address this behavior (Tony, personal communication, September 11, 2022). The teacher's inaction was indeed action in and of itself. Although Tony does not know who author Judy Alston is, his comment immediately made me think of what she described as her responsibility to socially ethical behavior. Alston believes that it is not only her responsibility but an obligation not to stay silent about social injustice and social inequities in the world and in education. Alston (2015) states, "I will not allow the privileging of others in my chosen discipline to continue to rule our theoretical perspectives that frame our current understandings of race, gender, sexuality, discourse, organization and leadership" (p. 398).

Alston is talking about oppression — those in power working to stay in power. Alston is also talking about power and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. She is saying that neither she nor anyone else who recognizes oppressive behavior and systems should sit back, idly watch, and allow the status quo to continue to prevail.

Angela remembers hair being an obstacle for her in high school. It was important to her that her hair always looked nice. When she first moved in with us, we paid for her to get her hair done at a professional salon. However, we had to tell her that was not something we could routinely provide for her due to the cost of the service. Angela often commented how

much she admired her cheerleading coach's hair, so my wife suggested that Angela ask Ms. Green, a Black female teacher at PHS who was also the cheerleading coach, how she does her hair. Ms. Green told Angela that she sews in her hair herself. Angela learned from Ms. Green and also supplemented this knowledge by watching YouTube videos on how to sew in her own hair. There were also times when Angela needed to wear a headwrap to feel more confident and to properly care for her hair, but these were not allowed according to the dress code at PHS. I have taken the following information from an internal document from Purple High School (citation and reference withheld to maintain the confidentiality of the school and participants):

DRESS CODE FOR STUDENTS

Expectations for student dress in Green County Schools are established to encourage grooming and hygiene, prevent disruption, avoid safety hazards, and reinforce community expectations in regard to character development.

Please make it a policy to check the dress of your students at the beginning of each class period. Personal attire may often determine safety, health, and success. Students should observe the following guidelines when dressing for school:

A. Caps, hats, bandanas, sweatbands, other head coverings or sunglasses may not be worn inside school buildings or other areas designated by the school.

The above items must be put into lockers at the beginning of the school day and not removed from lockers until the end of the day. If these items are worn or carried in the building they will be taken by a staff member and a PARENT can pick them up in the office.

Even though the headwraps that Angela (and other Black females) wore to school to care for her hair and present herself as well-groomed were not a distraction to the learning environment in any way, she was not allowed to wear them. The reason stated always pointed back to the internal document from PHS “head coverings may not be worn in the building” (citation and reference withheld to maintain the confidentiality of the school and participants). This type of policy perpetuates and enhances an unwelcoming or even hostile environment for female Black students, which can carry over into the classroom environment. Focusing on the stigma a policy such as this creates by deeming that the hairstyles and grooming needs of women of color are somehow inappropriate simply adds to a culture of othering and further distances these students from the stereotypes of what gifted students must look like. It is another indirect bias that makes them feel as if they do not fit in with gifted students because they do not adhere to the look of white students. However, whenever Angela would wear a headwrap it was to feel more confident since a Black female’s hair requires vastly different techniques for proper care. This policy strips women of color of their dignity.

Angela also shared that she is very intentional in how she talks and makes a point to sound as if she is educated by not overusing slang. She started this practice while in high school because she decided she was going to break the cycle of poverty and lack of education that has been prevalent in her birth family. Because of her deliberate language choices, she was often told that she was trying to be white by sounding as if she was trying to be white. However, according to Angela, her language choices are not about sounding white but rather about not sounding like her birth mother. These choices are about separating herself from the idea, and consequently the cycle, that Black people are not meant for the “smart” classes. She

admits that, subconsciously, she focused on not sounding a certain way in order to fit in with the white students but reiterated that it was more about elevating herself to show that a Black female was and is capable of succeeding and thriving in the white, patriarchal system (Angela, personal communication, July 25, 2022).

TB pointed out two separate instances where he felt that a teacher made a comment that was derogatory due to him being a Black student. The first one that he shared, “TB, you are too smart. You are capable of better” (TB, personal communication, November 8, 2022) was a comment that he recalled hearing occasionally, but he was not able to recount hearing it directed to his white classmates. TB did share an incident from second grade where his teacher told him that he could not wear a plain white t-shirt to school because it “looked like gang attire” (TB, personal communication, November 8, 2022). As a second grader, he certainly did not think anything of this comment. However, as an adult looking back at the incident, he wonders what was meant by the comment and believes that she probably did not say anything like this to his white classmates.

I learned that TB is not the type of person to rock the boat, so I was not surprised that he did not have much to say when I asked him to elaborate on either of these two instances or if he recalled witnessing other similar occurrences that involved his Black peers. However, he did offer that comments such as the one his second-grade teacher made are still made in classrooms more often than they should be—even once is one time more than it should happen. If Black students have to be subjected to comments like this over a sustained period of time, then it could inhibit the student from realizing their full potential in that class or future classes.

KB remembers being told by a teacher to calm down and stop being so “militant” when, in her mind, she was simply sharing her point of view and ideas on a particular topic (KB, Personal Communication, July 21, 2022). A few of the other participants relayed slightly different, yet similar recounts of their experiences in certain courses. The consensus among the participants was that not every teacher was as overt as the examples above, but periodically they did hear comments similar to these mentioned above.

The participants expressed that any discomfort they experienced while in a course that they felt was a direct result of the way the teacher treated them was more about the overall atmosphere of the classroom. The participants described a climate in several courses where degrading comments were allowed and/or ignored; the teacher acted as if they did not hear the negative comments and would look the other way when students made hurtful comments to the Black students. Tony mentioned that he once told a teacher that some of the students around him were making racial slurs toward him and the teacher’s response was that he did not believe those kids would do that. Tony's assessment was that, while teachers may not be overtly making the degrading comments themselves, they were not doing anything to stop the negative behavior either, which is just as harmful and hindering to the Black students.

It is easy to understand that when students are made to feel uncomfortable in a classroom by the teacher, whether it is directly due to actions by the teacher or indirectly due to the climate and culture of the classroom, the students have a significant barrier to overcome to be successful.

In line with previous research (Patalay et al., 2019; Van Ryzin et al., 2009;), a higher level of *school belonging* was associated with positive student-teacher relationships. The positive impact of teachers in the current study supports recent policy work in Scotland

regarding the protective effect of “one trusted adult” on adolescents (Whitehead et al., 2019). It is important for students to have a positive mentor-like relationship with at least one or more adults in high school. I asked the participants if they had any advice for students and parents on how to navigate the educational system to put themselves in the best position to reach their goals. I provide additional details below, but the top answer was to find a teacher or adult whom they could ask for help.

Advice

I asked the participants if they had any advice they would like to share with future Black students and their families. The unanimous piece of advice given by the participants was to “keep asking” until you find someone who is able and willing to provide the support you are seeking. Tony said, “I would tell anyone who asks me not to wait to be saved like me because you may not get saved. I know I was fortunate to have had people looking out for me and that was because I found that one person during my ninth-grade year in my English teacher” (Tony, personal communication, September 11, 2022). Angela echoed this comment by stating, “I had accepted that I was destined to enlist in one of the military branches and then see what happens from there. I never dreamed that I could get into a four-year college, because I didn’t know what I had to do to get there. I didn’t think I could do the upper-level classes and I definitely think they would put me in them” (Angela, personal communication, July 25, 2022). Angela feels like she got lucky because she was able to come live with us. However, as we talked, she realized that opportunities and supportive adults were present in her life, but she did not know how to ask. Therefore, now she would tell students and families to “keep asking anyone and everyone you can think of until you find someone who

can help because I didn't have to wait to get lucky" (Angela, personal communication, July 25, 2022).

The second prevailing piece of advice given was that students should never give up on themselves or their dreams. All of the participants agreed that self-efficacy is vital to a person's success. They were all quick to recognize that it is not easy to believe in yourself constantly and consistently, but it is important. Tony summed up this portion of the conversation in the focus group and in our interview by saying, "Giving up simply can't be an option for a Black student in our educational system" (Tony, personal communication, September 11, 2022). That is probably true for any student, but I know I have faced and will continue to face hurdles that white students don't, and therefore, it is imperative for students who look like me to persevere no matter the circumstances and never give up" (Tony, personal communication, September 11, 2022).

One of the main focuses of this project was to learn what Black students hear, experience, and believe about themselves and their opportunities in advanced courses, but these data cannot exist outside the context of how these lived experiences benefitted the participants. Therefore, in the next section, I counter the many negative encounters Black students experienced while enrolled in advanced high school courses with some of their positive experiences in those courses.

Positive Student Experiences

I made a conscious effort to not write this from a deficit-focused perspective, but not all of the experiences that the participants shared are stories of good times and happiness. Therefore, it became important that I stress the benefits that the participants realized because these benefits represent something positive for these young people of color. These data

represent the positivity that comes as a result of these students surviving and thriving in our educational system while taking advanced courses. Participants shared a multitude of positive experiences and benefits as a result of completing advanced courses in high school. The highlights of those benefits can be summarized by stating that the participants felt better prepared for the rigors of college academics and the demands of the time constraints in which they faced. These benefits represent the hard work and perseverance that these participants exhibited as they rose above the system that is designed to erase them rather than to create opportunities for them to prosper.

Summary of Common Themes

When I took a deep dive into the data and employed a simple color-coding system, I was able to identify some common themes. In review, the following is a list of the top commonalities from the literature review and participants' perceptions and experiences related to advanced courses in high school at the center of this project:

- Black students are typically one of only a few students of color in advanced courses.
- Black students typically do not feel comfortable participating in class discussions.
- Black students endure damaging comments from white peers in advanced courses.
- Black students many times endure an inhibiting atmosphere in advanced courses.
- All of the participants advised other students to never give up and keep asking for help.
- The benefits of taking these courses outweigh most obstacles.

It is reassuring to realize that the stories from the participants reinforced the information that I pulled from the review of the literature.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned research, there is clearly an opportunity gap as Black students are underrepresented in honors, AP, and dual-enrollment courses in high school. In this section, I focused on the experiences and perceptions of underrepresented students who enrolled in and completed advanced courses in high school. In this case study, information was collected using focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires as part of a qualitative research study using CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) for the theoretical framework that informed this project. As mentioned earlier, member checks were built in during each stage throughout the research process. The participants were provided a copy of the recordings, notes, and writing for their review and to provide feedback regarding what data I presented and how I presented it.

In the following chapter, I provide extensive detail about the community outreach event that I previously mentioned. This intervention was a direct result of my dissertation as I felt compelled to take action to make a difference in my community. This chapter focuses on the planning, execution, and results from this inaugural event to provide Black students and their families with information about advanced high school courses.

I understand the goal of Critical Theory is to gather information, understand the position or motivations of those in power, and challenge laws, policies, and unjust practices. I also understand that solving the problem is not necessarily the main goal of CRT, however, my goal for this project is to inform students, parents, and practitioners that there is a problem and to open the lines of communication for discourse that can lead to a shift toward a more equal and inclusive system with regard to how Black students are provided access to advanced courses in high school. In the next sections, I present possible pathways for educational leaders to use to recognize potentially problematic enrollment practices in

advanced high school courses in their respective schools and some potential ways to close this gap or “reduce the debt” as described by Ladson-Billings (2013, p. 105).

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF OUTREACH EVENT

Introduction

My research on why Black students are disproportionately underrepresented in advanced courses in high school led me to design and lead a community intervention program. This section of my dissertation shifts the focus to this action plan, which manifested as a result of the data I collected, presented in the previous chapter of this study.

In this section, I detail the information and lessons learned from a community outreach program featuring sessions of informational presentations and a panel of educators, parents, and students for a question-answer segment. The central research question for this phase of my study is: How can we inform students, parents/guardians, and community stakeholders about the different high school advanced course options?

This research was important because Black students and their families buy into the deficit thinking process that if they do not automatically qualify for advanced courses or if the students were tracked into the lower track earlier in their academic career, then they have no recourse to gain access to these courses in high school. It is important for discourse to occur that can create an unsettling of the current structure in place and the current way of thinking. This unsettling then leads to challenging the status quo, which can ultimately mean that changes in the system are possible.

Educational researchers and leaders must move beyond this type of rationality—creating or allowing a dichotomy for our Black students that limits them—because this brand of irrationality is synonymous with treating those that are marginalized as if they are “not fully human” (Hekman, 1990, p. 36). The purpose of the outreach event was to share the knowledge that I gained, from the literature review and data collection process with the

participants to Black students and their families to equip them with the knowledge needed to break free of the destructive systems they face.

In this section, I summarize the vision, planning phase, implementation, reflections on the event, and plans for a community outreach that was the culmination of the research for my dissertation. The outreach program was intended for students and families to learn how to navigate the process of enrolling in advanced high school courses, how to survive and thrive in these courses, and how students can benefit from taking such courses. I was fortunate to have a multitude of community partners for this event, which would not have been possible without their support. These community partners also ensured that the event was a success. This section was written through my lens as an experienced administrator and leader who is in close touch with his community. I want to take advantage of my experience as an administrator and successful relationship-building attributes and write this section for Black students and their families to gain insider knowledge.

Methods of the Outreach Event

Meet The Program Supporters

We originally considered a Zoom option, but everyone who was able to participate was able to attend in person. In the initial group meeting with the program supporters, I presented the idea of a community outreach event, because I knew I needed their support and ideas for it to be successful. Everyone in attendance unanimously agreed that the event was a good idea.

Janice: Graduation Coach

Janice, who works with school-dependent children from a variety of backgrounds helped advertise the event and secured donations — refreshments, snacks, door prizes, etc.

Janice is very organized and did not want to speak at the event, so she helped by recruiting for attendance and organizing the refreshments. Her presence made many of the attendees feel comfortable and she answered a lot of questions during the fellowship period. Janice acted as the host during the event, ensuring that each of the attendees had a handout and filled out the necessary paperwork.

Community Partner

The K.M. Elite Club (KMEC) partnered with me on the outreach program through advertising and recruiting efforts and providing the physical space for the meeting. KMEC is an organization in the city of Kings Mountain whose mission is to holistically enhance the mental, physical, and spiritual well-being of youth ages five through fifteen through quality educational and recreational programs. The K.M. Elite Club offers football, cheerleading, and basketball programs for youth ages five to fifteen and tutoring opportunities for children in first grade through fifth grade. This was an important and influential partnership, because, even though KMEC is open to all students, the majority of the students who participate in the athletic and tutoring programs are Black students. To provide as much context as possible, it is important to note that KMEC has become the most influential comprehensive organization in Kings Mountain with regard to youth sports and promoting the importance of education to our youth—specifically to the families and Black students in Kings Mountain. The President of KMEC, Michael, and the Vice President of KMEC, Betty, were very influential members of the planning committee for this event.

High School Teacher

Cynthia participated in the community outreach session. Cynthia is a female science teacher. She was a member of the question-and-answer panel. Cynthia is a graduate of

Southern High School, one of the other three high schools in the same school district as PHS. She was able to provide experiential information from the lens of a former student who had to self-advocate to enroll in advanced courses, and she was also able to provide insight on this topic through the lens of a teacher. Cynthia's story and information were very powerful, because the students and families relate to her as a person who has endured comparable obstacles as them. She also represents a success story.

I was very fortunate to have the support of these experienced and influential community stakeholders. The knowledge and expertise of these community members and the experiences of the participants from the study provided the perfect combination for a successful outreach event. In the next section, I outline the goals of the event, the details of the planning process, and the itinerary.

Bringing the Research Alive to the Community

As stated earlier, this community program concept originated from conversations between my dissertation committee chair and myself. The details were developed during the data collection phases and I refined the plans during conversations with the rest of the supporters mentioned above. One of the first questions that most of the contributors asked me was where was I planning to hold the event—what physical space was I planning to invite all of these families and Black students into? Since one of the goals for hosting this event was to get as many students and their families as possible to attend and then share the information, I already knew that I could not host this event at the high school, if I wanted good attendance. However, the fact that several of the project supporters asked me this question solidified that I was doing the right thing by not hosting at the local high school. The Vice President of KMEC, who is in charge of educational advancement for the group, suggested that we use

the multi-purpose room of one of the local elementary schools. Asking to hold the community outreach program at this particular venue was an intentional move because this school is one of the main partners with The K.M. Elite Club. This building is where The KMEC conducts its afterschool tutoring program and Saturday practices and games. Therefore, much of the target audience was already familiar with this venue and already comfortable coming into this space. Since we held the event on a day that coincided with the Saturday basketball schedule, much of the intended audience was already present at the site. One challenge that I experienced in the pre-planning stage was ensuring that we had access to adequate technology for the presentations and Zoom. Planning the rest of the details was very challenging to physically organize due to the constraints of the space where we held the event.

Goals of the Event

The main goal of this event was to present information about advanced courses in high school to students and families of color—specifically, information regarding the benefits of taking advanced courses in high school, how to choose which courses to register for in a high school, how many AP courses to take and how dual-enrollment courses work into the equation, how to enroll in advanced courses if the student does not automatically qualify, and how to succeed in these upper-level courses.

We had two secondary goals for the long-term vision of this event. One of those secondary goals was to provide access for the families and students who attended so that they could ask questions of educators and former students in a comfortable environment. Learning from people with an experiential point of view and who are more likely to understand the obstacles participants might face was an important aspect of the programming. This more

informal atmosphere was purposeful in order to lower barriers that might exist within the more “formal” school setting, where families and students may feel uncomfortable asking administrators these types of questions.

An additional goal for this inaugural meeting was to spark an interest and, therefore, create a demand to continue holding this event every year with a goal to expand to other parts of the county (i.e. other zones that feed into the other three high schools in the same school district). The goal was not to condemn the current system and policies, but rather to help people recognize that an opportunity gap exists in order to provide an access point for appropriate discourse for potential solutions regarding enrollment for advanced courses in high school.

I knew that good attendance was necessary to accomplish these goals, which is why the location and timing were major considerations. In the next section, I detail the organization and format of this event.

Organization and Format of the Community Outreach Event

I met with Michael and Janice in person because they all live in my community and have ties to my school. I wanted to provide the opportunity for them to ask questions and be equal partners in the planning process. The next step was to schedule a meeting for us to plan the specific details for the event—the exact day and time, who would speak, what information they would present, the order in which people would present, how long we would like them to speak, how to advertise and recruit for the event, what type and quantity of refreshments, and how much time we would provide for informal fellowship at the end. I offered my participants the opportunity to meet with us as well, but none of them were available at the time that the community stakeholders could meet. The participants had

previously provided feedback regarding their thoughts and ideas for the outreach event, so I shared this information with the rest of the planning committee.

Format and Itinerary for the Event

One of the most important considerations for the outreach event was what information to include and how long to spend on each item. The format and itinerary for the event are listed below:

- Open mingle opportunities for the first ten to fifteen minutes
- The director of The K.M. Elite Club introduced the event
- I presented a short ten-minute presentation
 - purpose of the event and a brief outline of the benefits of advanced courses
 - basic overview of the registration process at PHS
 - the types of advanced courses provided at PHS
 - suggestions on how to navigate the system
- The last formal activity was a question-answer session involving the participants
 - The Director of The K.M. Elite Club and I served as the moderators
- The attendees had the opportunity to ask individual questions
- We concluded the event by offering the attendees an opportunity to fellowship

The other community partners did not want to present to the attendees. Each community partner shared pertinent information through their specific lens, which I included in my presentation.

Michael contributed information through the lens of a community educator, community leader, and as a father. He shared his experiences regarding his son taking advanced courses and seeking acceptance into a four-year college. He also shared his insight

and expertise as a community leader who is creating an entire outreach program that welcomes all students. Even though this organization is open for all youth, he founded this program as a way to provide access to resources for tutoring and athletics for marginalized youth in our community.

Cynthia shared her information during the question-and-answer time. She added her insight and suggestions through the lens of a former student who did not automatically qualify for advanced courses. She and her mother had to fight for her inclusion into these courses; she was able to present her perspective through the lens of a current teacher who teaches non-honors and honors level science courses to high school students.

Scott, a community member who works with school-dependent students in several area high schools, asked me to share knowledge that he has learned through his experiences with high school students. He asked me to speak about the opportunities that he has seen afforded to students who enrolled in and successfully completed advanced courses versus students who did not enroll in advanced courses.

Although there was much overlap among these different points of view, each one of these different people brought a unique and valuable perspective that no one else could have presented. The culmination of all of this information is what made the question-and-answer panel such a powerful highlight of the event. Each presenter successfully set the stage for the attendees to seek more information.

We had snacks and refreshments available, which were provided through a combination of donations and small local grants. We also provided contact information for all of the presenters and panel participants, who gave us permission to do so, in case any of the attendees had follow-up questions. We asked the attendees to complete an exit survey

before they left. We plan to use the results (provided in a later section) to make adjustments for planning future events. Moving forward, we hope to provide an even better service for the next event. The most positive aspect of the event was the question-and-answer session between the panel and the attendees. The information that I presented at the beginning of the event was well-received, but the opportunity to hear from and ask questions of former students and current educators was very beneficial. The audience was interactive and had several questions for the panel, especially once the first question was asked and the rest of the audience then felt comfortable asking questions. The audience members asked questions faster than the panel members could respond. This is a major indicator, regardless of attendees' trepidation at the beginning of the event, that they believed the experiential-based information was relevant and useful. I attribute the success of this portion of the event to the planning committee's foresight to provide a significant portion of time for the question-and-answer session. The committee knew that preliminary presentations were important, but understanding that the freedom to ask questions was paramount to the success of this event. We knew the measurement for success would be intangible. We felt that if the attendees appeared to be attentive and asked questions, then we could consider the event a success.

I assessed when it was time to end the formal question and answer session based on when the questions subsided. However, the attendees had informal access to all of the event presenters for an additional amount of time after the formal conclusion of the event. All of the contributors and participants stayed until there were no attendees left asking questions. Several of the attendees stayed and asked a few questions individually.

What I Learned and What I Would Do Differently

I embarked on this endeavor because, based on the review of the literature and my research with the former high school student participants, I knew a knowledge gap existed for community members regarding the benefits of advanced courses, navigating the system, and surviving and thriving in advanced courses. I was counting on the idea that Black students and families would have the desire to learn this information if they had an opportunity to do so. I was not sure if people would attend, but I was hopeful. I was not sure if students and their families thought it was important enough to learn this information to attend. While I had hoped for a standing-room-only crowd, which is not what happened, there were about fifteen families in attendance at the event, accounting for approximately thirty people.

Feedback from the Survey

At the conclusion of the event, we asked people to complete and sign a permission form allowing us to use their pictures for future advertisement purposes. We also provided an exit survey. The most common comments from the audience into the following top three areas are outlined below:

- We do not know what all of the acronyms mean (CCP, AP, CP).
- Can you explain further the difference between AP and honors?
- You need to keep doing this. I learned a lot, but I think it can go even deeper!

These three comments represent the basis for what we will adjust for next year's event. We received two other pieces of feedback during our informal conversations during a time of fellowship after the formal question and answer session ended. The additional comments focused on advertising (i.e. more widespread advertising is needed and more details in the

advertisements are needed) and we will use this information moving forward as well. We plan to expand next year and hold the event in two locations.

The Purpose of the Event

What is the point of completing research such as this if not to strive for an equitable society? I was questioned why I organized and hosted a community event if I could not be sure if people would attend or if I was unsure that there was an interest. My response was, “because there is a need and I believe the interest will spread.” Additionally, I struggle to separate my identity as an administrator who is constantly seeking solutions to problems from my identity as an educational researcher, who is not always using theory that calls for a solution. Therefore, I was driven to put this research into action in the form of a community outreach event, because I believed that this event could be part of the solution. The purpose is to bring about a shift in the status quo of registration practices for advanced high school courses that currently limit access for Black students.

Data the Community Needs to Know

The goal is to help Black students gain access to advanced curriculum in high school, so that they can enroll in the regular first-year courses in college. This is important because students who do not need remedial courses in college are more likely to graduate (Bryant, 2015). One of the best ways to ensure that a student, regardless of race, is able to be placed into the regular curriculum when they enter college is for them to have taken a challenging and rigorous course of study while in high school, such as honors courses, dual-enrollment courses, and especially AP courses (Bryant, 2015). Advanced Placement test scores are better than any other measured factor, except high school grades, to predict college sophomores’ GPAs (Scott et al., 2010). Black students may know the necessary steps to be successful in

college, but this does not guarantee access to the curriculum or the knowledge of how to navigate the educational system that limits Black students. But, knowing this information may help motivate a student to want to ask for access and push for success in advanced high school courses. These courses can help prepare a student to succeed in college and help guard against needing remedial measures. There are plenty of naysayers when it comes to the AP program and how The College Board is structured. Although experts agree that the AP program is not devoid of issues, McCauley (2007) concluded that AP courses are still a significant predictor of who is likely to graduate from a four-year institution, showing that the advantages outweigh the problems with the AP program (Scott et al., 2010).

During my research, the participants unanimously agreed that the most important characteristic that a student who does not automatically qualify for the advanced curriculum should display is persistence. When I asked the participants what advice they would give to current students who are seeking a foothold in these courses, which is the gateway to success in college, they all said—"Ask!" All of the participants were adamant that the best thing any student and parent could do is to ask as many people as possible and as many questions as possible about their experiences and perceptions regarding these types of courses.

In some cases, students and families do not ask for support or advice, because they do not believe that the school personnel will help. School counselors are highly effective advocates for helping students succeed in college—regardless of the color of the students or the counselor (Bryant, 2015). Bryant (2015) stated that "Positive, authentic relationships with counselors and teachers are important for creating college expectations (p. 11)." Students and their families need to keep asking until they find someone who will provide support.

Parent Involvement

When parents/guardians are directly involved in their children's education, there is a positive impact. Research as far back as the 1980s and 1990s shows that high school students have a lot of autonomy when it comes to decision-making opportunities regarding their schedule. This also suggests that their parents/guardians have influence over their schedules (Useem, 1992). Therefore, it is vital that we, as educators and educational researchers, do all that we can to make sure that students and their families are educated and informed of the processes, benefits, and consequences of enrollment decisions for their children while in high school. This is not as important in elementary or middle school, because the course selections or curriculum is more standardized. The one exception is that early tracking begins in middle school as students. Near the end of their middle school days, students begin to prepare for high school registration. All of this to say that it is never too early to shape attitudes toward education in a positive direction.

The higher the education level of the caregiver, especially the mother, the more involved and aware they are of their children's course of study, abilities, and performance (Useem, 1992). So, once again, we as educators need to help close this knowledge gap between students with parents/guardians who are educated and equipped to help their child and parents/guardians who are not as well-equipped. If, as educational leaders, we truly strive for equity and inclusion, then helping a student to the most rigorous course of study that challenges them academically should be a goal.

Our community event was designed as a step toward getting parents/guardians more involved in school activities, such as open houses, curriculum night, parent-teacher conferences, etc. There is a correlation among parents/guardians involvement in school

activities, parents/guardians involvement in the scheduling process, and how rigorous the course of study is that students enroll in. When parents/guardians are more involved in these activities they tend to have greater knowledge of the courses needed to challenge students and set them up for success after high school graduation (Useem, 1992).

Events such as mine and others like it help build capacity within our communities by creating more informed, aware, and involved families. Knowledge about school and education can help eliminate some of the prevailing attitudes that families whose primary caregivers are without post-secondary degrees may hold. I collected the following comments regarding course registration from the adults that attended my outreach event:

- This is all a little hard to understand.
- I don't always know what they should take.
- I just let my kid decide what they take.
- I thought it was alright to let the counselors handle it.

All of these comments indicate that these parents/guardians are not equipped to guide their children in the registration process, because they do not possess the necessary knowledge. The purpose of this community outreach event was to equip parents/guardians with the tools to better navigate the system. These comments from the students and families who attended my outreach event affirm what research has presented. For example, I have pulled a few comments from a study by Useem (1992):

- We are new at this and it is overwhelming.
- We are leaving the decision up to my child and what subjects they like.
- We are leaving it up to the teachers and counselors.
- We do not know what our children need. (p. 275)

One of the reasons that parents leave so much of the decision-making part of this process up to the child is that they themselves are overwhelmed and do not know how to make the best choices (Useem, 1992.). Again, this research showed me that the outreach event was needed.

Support for AP Courses

One of the pieces of feedback that we received at the end of the community outreach event was that the attendees wanted to know more about the differences among AP, dual-enrollment, and honors courses and the specific expectations and rigors of an AP course. One parent explained that she has heard a lot of positives about AP classes, but she has also heard many negative things such as:

- AP courses are all about more standardized testing.
- AP courses are biased.
- AP courses are reserved for white middle and upper-class students.

We spent several minutes talking about the expectations of AP courses, the syllabus approval process between the school and The College Board, the course structures, and the general prerequisites for AP courses. I then reminded her of the benefits that I covered earlier during the presentation. The significance of this conversation and the feedback that we received is that it is important to continually remind students of the benefits of a rigorous course of study while in high school and that their course of study should include a good mix of honors, AP, and dual-enrollment courses, rather than strictly one type. Researchers know that college admissions officers look favorably on AP course experience (Adelman, 1999; Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013), and some colleges award college credit if students score high enough on the AP exam. Therefore, it should be obvious that The College Board

recommends that AP teachers have extensive experience and knowledge in the subject they teach (Klopfenstein, 2003), but schools have complete autonomy when it comes to assigning teachers to a course. The lack of an experienced, knowledgeable teacher in an AP classroom can lead to students and parents/guardians losing confidence in specific AP courses or even the AP program as a whole. In situations where the school leadership does not have the option to place experienced teachers in the AP classroom, then they may choose the next best option or decide not to offer the course at all. Neither of these choices is a good option. I can state from experience that, in most of the schools in which I have served, if there was not a sufficiently knowledgeable *and* experienced teacher in a certain subject matter, the AP course was not offered. I have witnessed multiple times when the teacher assigned to teach an AP course lacked extensive experience *or* knowledge—meaning that I have seen schools assign teachers to specific AP courses who have little to no experience teaching the subject but at least majored in the subject. I have also seen schools assign a teacher to teach an AP course who had extensive experience teaching that particular subject but not extensive knowledge (i.e. they lacked a degree in the subject area). I was assigned to teach AP calculus during my second year of teaching. I have a B.S. in mathematics and a minor in physics, so I was well-qualified from a knowledge perspective, but not from an experience standpoint. The school provided me with a veteran mentor, who had taught AP calculus for several years. This mentorship helped close the gap that existed due to my lack of experience. The strategy was put into place to help me grow as an AP teacher and also to maintain confidence in the AP calculus program at the school.

Longstanding Negative Perceptions

As I shift from looking specifically at a few aspects of the AP program to a more general view, I examine a few early educational practices. The achievement gap in our nation's schools is not new. In the early 1900s, as the social efficiency movement was growing, schools were seen as "factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life" (Cubberley, 1916, p. 338). A student was assigned to one of 28 academic, general, or vocational tracks based on the student's perceived skills and employment needs within the community. Based on my experience as an administrator in two different high schools and as a teacher in four different high schools, this is not how schools determine a student's academic pathway. Students are tracked based on standardized scores, grades, and teacher recommendations as they move from eighth grade into ninth grade. However, neither system (the one described above in 1916 nor the one I just outlined) provides access to all academic options for all students. Although The AP program is not the magical silver bullet to solve all of the problems stemming from excluding Black students from taking advanced courses, the AP program is still strong and one of the leading advanced curriculum programs (Farkas & Duffett, 2009) as a predictor for college success.

Educational leaders need to continue to push for and hold students to high expectations. Accepting low academic expectations does not help put students in a position to be successful beyond high school. Low academic expectations for Black students whose race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status have historically underperformed in school prevent capable students from enrolling in advanced courses (Ketelsen, 2017). Students from the groups mentioned are kept out of the advanced courses, because of prior low performance, or

worse, *perceived* low performance. In many cases, they do not have access because of perceived performance, and they do not know how to gain access (Ketelsen, 2017). I am genuinely concerned that capable Black high school students might be missing out on the necessary curricular opportunities due to perceptions by their educators. In these cases, the educator believes that these students are not capable academically. These negative perceptions can sometimes be traced back to lack of teacher training, lack of student and family knowledge regarding the benefits of taking advanced courses, or the lack of knowledge on how to navigate the system (Ketelsen, 2017).

Will There be a Butterfly Effect?

Considering that one of the goals of this project is to have more Black students enrolled in advanced courses, I am interested to learn if any of the students who attended the event called their school to ask about upper-level courses, such as honors, dual-enrollment, or AP. One of the potential unintended consequences of this event is an increased workload for the registration team at the school. If the event is a success, whether it is an immediate success or it takes a year or two, then more students will inquire about enrolling in advanced courses. This can then create a more involved and complicated registration process for the counselors, because of the extra steps it takes to verify a student is qualified for an advanced course, if they did not automatically qualify. I believe that most school counselors, certainly the ones I have worked with, want the best for students. Therefore, my previous point is not meant to suggest that this is a negative consequence, but rather a step that will simply require more time to complete the registration process.

The normal prerequisite for placement in an advanced course includes a high enough grade in certain pre-requisite courses, a sufficient score on standardized tests, and teacher

recommendations or a combination of these factors. Many times, if a student does not automatically qualify for placement into one of these courses through one of the aforementioned avenues, they typically do not pursue the matter. However, if a student and their family choose to push for placement into an honors-level, dual-enrollment, or AP course, then usually that process begins with correspondence or a meeting with a school counselor or administrator.

Through my experience as a school administrator and as a parent, I have learned that if a student does not automatically qualify for the advanced courses curriculum it is still possible to convince the school to place a child into these types of courses. However, it is necessary to know how to navigate the system and speak the language, which is one of the things we hoped to teach the attendees at the outreach event.

I am fully prepared for and welcome discourse regarding any additional traffic in the school office as a result of students and their families contacting the school regarding enrolling in advanced courses. In fact, the primary purpose of this event was to create more inquiries for the counselors and administrators in the school office from students and families seeking admission into advanced courses. Conversations among students, parents/guardians, and educators are not only a proper beginning to closing the opportunity gap, but it is the necessary foundation for closing the achievement gap. Therefore, opening the lines of communication and avenues to access for students and families who are traditionally underrepresented is not only a move that benefits a specific group—Black students—but it is a shift toward a more socially just society.

Findings

Based on my review of the literature and my research with Black high school students, I suspected that there was a knowledge gap and a need for this event to educate students and families on the rigors of navigating the educational system. The response at the end of this event confirmed that I was correct.

One of the more important findings was learning that when educators present information to students and families, every detail needs to be broken down into the simplest form by using straightforward language. It is difficult to completely understand the terms and acronyms that are commonplace in educational language when an educational setting is not part of your everyday life. When educators speak with people outside of the profession, all details must be fully explained to avoid misunderstandings and confusion. For example, during my presentation at the community event, I thought that I had sufficiently explained what “AP” represented, defined AP courses, and the differences among AP, honors, and dual-enrollment courses. However, we had several individuals speak with us individually at the end of the event and their top request was for us to explain what AP meant and the differences between AP and honors courses. So, I learned that I need to simplify and repeat the information in which I present regarding what AP stands for and the differences in the three types of advanced courses.

As mentioned above, I learned that the lack of support available for students and families who find themselves looking in from the outside of the advanced curriculum bubble is far less than I believed. I knew that there was a knowledge gap, which is why I needed to complete this research and organize this event, but I did not realize how wide the gap is. When the parents/guardians who spoke with us individually told us things such as “we are

overwhelmed, we do not know where to begin, and we do not feel like we will be listened to,” it brought a sobering awareness to me about this problem. This issue resonated more deeply with attendees than I anticipated. This awareness solidified my resolve to remain committed to continuing the community outreach portion of this project in the future.

Based on my research and a review of the literature on this topic in Chapter Two, I provided a multitude of ideas, strategies, and techniques that educational researchers and leaders can use to bridge the opportunity gap, create access to an exclusive system, and create an educational environment geared toward diversity, equity, and inclusion. I now draw from my extensive experience as a practitioner to make recommendations for school leaders in order to produce a more inclusive school environment that better serves their Black students and community.

Capitalizing on My Experience

In my experience, school leaders claim that they are inclusive. I believe that educational leaders in general, not only assert that they strive for excellence and inclusion, but many would be shocked and appalled if they were to learn that some of their actions and decisions are exclusive. I posit that most school leaders whose practices are exclusive and whose schools limit opportunities for Black students are not aware of these issues. I also hold that ignorance of the problem is not an excuse for a school administrator to ignore the issues and allow exclusionary practices to continue in their school. It is negligent for educational researchers and leaders to refrain from examining their school data and then making data-driven decisions.

It is my contention that if school administrators would scrutinize the data regarding enrollment for advanced courses in their school like they do performance data, then they

would see a clear and decisive gap between the enrollment percentages of white versus Black students. Consequently, if the school leader genuinely strives to create an atmosphere of inclusion and opportunity for their Black students, then being an agent for change would be a necessary requisite.

I do not believe that educational leaders set out to maliciously ignore problems such as those I have outlined in this dissertation. I believe that school administrators are overworked, overwhelmed, and short on the time needed to accomplish all that is asked of them. For example, Villegas (2022), revealed the following answer from an educator when asked about advocating for students' inclusion, "There were frankly too many students to advocate for, and I was one of only a handful willing to speak up for inclusive practices" (para 6). I can certainly relate to these sentiments, but the school principal (and their administrative team) is the key agent for change in a school and as such should make equity-based change a priority in their school (Cohen, 2015).

Leading effective equity-focused leadership requires courage, perseverance, and integrity. The path is difficult but has become fundamentally urgent considering the current social and political climate. For example, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis proposed a bill to eradicate inclusionary style practices and curriculum in colleges and universities (The Florida State Senate HB 999, 2023). I have outlined several strategies and techniques that I gleaned from the literature and my research. These are not intended to be static, but rather administrators need to design initiatives that fit with their school's culture and climate. In other words, school leaders need to know their community and school through interaction and immersion. Leaders can then craft equity-based change in a way that works best for them.

My message to educational researchers and leaders is to be involved in their school, be visible, utilize informal conversation opportunities to learn about the students and staff, look at the quantitative data, and then review all of the quantitative and qualitative data to formulate the best plan of action to initiate equity-focused change. I also suggest that it is wise to seek counsel from other successful administrators and to use a team approach when making significant decisions such as this by seeking input from teacher leaders, community stakeholders, families, students, and central office staff. Additionally, making changes that provide educational opportunities for more students, particularly Black students, can improve the school's overall performance.

Leadership is not easy, but school leadership can be rewarding when leaders make courageous informed decisions that prove to be inclusive for all students.

Conclusion

Overall, this event was a success because we were able to reach 15 different families and inform them about the benefits of advanced courses in high school, provide insight about how to navigate the system of enrollment, and provide access to students, parents, and educators via the panel for the attendees to ask specific questions. I also consider this event a success, because we did it. The only way it would have been a failure is not to have done it. We may not have had a capacity crowd, a lot of fanfare, and media coverage, but this inaugural event was the first of anything like it in our community and opened the door for future events of this nature. Community leaders from a nearby town heard about our presentation and have reached out to ask us to consider presenting at an additional venue so we can reach the students from the other schools in our county.

A main question that I am continually asked is, “Why do something like this instead of letting the schools handle it?” I understand that there are two underlying questions in this example: 1) Why would you go through the trouble of organizing and hosting a community outreach event when it is the school’s job? 2) Even though you work at a school, aren’t you a little worried that you will step on their toes?

I believe that these are genuine questions, but the intentions behind them are naive, because they discount the foundational reason for this event—the targeted audience is members of a people group who have been marginalized, diminished, overlooked, and systematically cut out of the loop of access and prosperity by our schools and society. I have already shown that students and families like the ones who attended our session are sometimes less likely to count on and trust the school, which is why we did not hold the event at the local high school. This is also why we partnered with teachers, college graduates, and professionals who are people of color to bring the information.

Another reason why I proceeded with this event was that community outreach events are opportunities for people to gather over a common idea to learn about and discuss social issues to bring about awareness of social problems, which can all lead to growth. Community outreach events can galvanize a group of people, and an informed, galvanized group of people can bring about a shift in power because there is strength in a collective group.

Many Black students come to school every day carrying some sort of trauma (Love, 2019). I hope that any school of which I am a part of provides opportunities to mitigate and eliminate additional stressors that add to the trauma our students' experience. It is my hope that in some way, shape, or form that an event such as this and others in the future can be a

catalyst for acceptance, access, and inclusivity for our Black students in high school and beyond.

Significance of this Community Event

This research study is unique in that I employed Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to interrupt the typical school culture where the norm was to look the other way when data was presented to the administration and counselors that Black students were underrepresented in advanced courses at the school. Test scores alone do not show that Black students are provided access to these courses, and believe this is simply a way of hoping that a problem will go away by ignoring it. Therefore, I knew that the current system needed to be disrupted and I did this by using the data from my research to justify organizing and hosting the community outreach event.

One purpose behind the event was to produce practical knowledge by putting into action the theoretical knowledge learned from the research. Knowledge does not exist before theory and all information is influenced by one's worldview (Jensen, 2013). People's political views, religious views, and societal views come together to define who a person is as a member of the society in which they live. These ideas and views affect how a person seeks and conceptualizes new concepts and, therefore, shapes their knowledge of the world. People have a natural curiosity to seek knowledge about things in which they are interested, but contest if it is needed for the new knowledge to be useful (Nealon & Giroux, 2011). One of the goals of the event was to present new information—how to navigate the educational system and the benefits of enrolling in advanced courses—to put context to this knowledge and transfer the theoretical knowledge to practical knowledge for use by the attendees.

I understand the goal of Critical Theory is to gather information, understand the position or motivations of those in power, and challenge laws, policies, and unjust practices. I also understand that solving the problem is not necessarily the main goal of CRT, however, my goal for this project to inform students, parents/guardians, and practitioners that there is a problem and to open the lines of communication for discourse lead to an action phase of this project in the form of a community outreach event. Through focused discourse based on the knowledge presented at events like the one I organized, a shift toward a more equal and inclusive system with regard to how Black students are provided access to advanced courses in high school can happen.

Theoretical knowledge teaches the why about something, whereas practical knowledge shows the how about something. According to Van de Ven and Johnson (2006), the issue with which researchers must usually contend is the gap that exists between theory and practice. There is growing concern that academic research does not prove useful in solving practical problems, which leads researchers to believe that the disconnect between theory and practice is a transfer problem (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 802). Transferring the theoretical knowledge to the students and families shifts the knowledge from theoretical to practical knowledge, which means the knowledge now becomes dynamic rather than static.

The foundational reason for the outreach event was to provide context for the information that was presented. According to Nealon and Giroux (2011), “there is no such thing as meaning outside of context” (p. 36). I needed to provide the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, and the community outreach program was the perfect vehicle to do so because concepts cannot truly have meaning until readers can put

them in the context of their situations and their knowledge of the world. My research and action plan is an effort to decolonize this piece of the educational system.

Through this project I have included a fresh and unique perspective to the current research alliteration. I am connected to and view this issue through multiple lenses. I have professional experiences in this topic as a teacher and administrator; I have a personal connection to the problem as a parent; and I am passionate about effecting change as a parent and educational researcher and leader.

My dissertation concludes (Chapter Six) with a focus on the systems, policies, and norms that create and perpetuate restricted access to advanced courses for certain students, specifically Black students. The goal of this research was to discover and reveal barriers that are seen and, more importantly, unseen. My intended audience is practitioners, and these recommendations can serve as an educational piece to create a more equitable and accessible system for all students within their schools. In this final chapter, I provide a summary of the research process, the results and conclusions from this research and the community outreach event. In the final section, I provide details regarding my future plans for this research, additional considerations for this research, and how my work uniquely contributes to educational research as a whole. Also included, is information that can serve as a means for educational researchers to address gaps in other research and practices on advanced course enrollment procedures.

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recommendations can serve as an educational piece to create a more equitable and accessible system for all students within their schools. In the final section, I provide information that can serve as a means for educational researchers to address gaps in other research and practices on advanced course enrollment procedures.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

My research is focused on why Black students are disproportionately underrepresented in advanced courses in high school. In this chapter, I conclude my dissertation by summarizing the major themes from my research process, reporting the key findings, providing recommendations for school leaders, and outlining the implications for educational researchers and leaders. Next, I focus on why educators should support enrollment in AP courses and how educational leaders can support students enrolled in AP courses. Also in this chapter, I present the significant contributions that my research adds to the field of education as well as some of the limitations and challenges that I faced. Finally, I outline possible considerations for future research and I detail my plans for this work moving forward.

Shifting Enrollment Procedures for Advanced Courses from Limiting to Open Practices: How Educational Leaders Can Help

What can educational leaders and teachers do to create a more inclusive and equitable system? What decisions can educational leaders and teachers make that will break the conditioning that being successful is only synonymous with being white? The driving research question for this section is: What influences administrator and teacher decisions regarding student enrollment in advanced courses?

Key Findings

According to the participants, some of their difficulties in advanced courses stem from being the only Black student in the class, being afraid to be wrong, and being fearful to speak their opinion or truth when asked. Consequently, these factors can lead to Black students underperforming in these courses. These experiences seem to support the practice of not enrolling Black students in advanced courses, because of the pervasive idea that they do not belong, are not academically prepared, or are not smart enough to take these courses. These obstacles are a result of the deficit language that is pervasive in our educational lingo, which then furthers the damage-centered beliefs held by many educators (Paris, 2019; Tuck, 2009).

As evidence that this type of language and consequent beliefs lead to the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced courses, a recent study by The Education Trust (2020) confirms claims that Black students are underrepresented in advanced courses, “Black and Latino students are locked out of Advanced Placement (AP). Black students make up 15% of high schoolers nationwide, but only 9% of students enrolled in at least one AP course” (para 4). The study also comments on obstacles and biases that students of color face when trying to enroll in advanced courses:

- Resource inequities caused by funding gaps in school districts that serve large populations of Black students have a profound effect on the educational opportunities districts and schools can provide.
- Educator bias is one of the biggest barriers for Black and Latino students when school leadership overly rely on the recommendations of teachers and counselors whose judgments may be shaped by implicit or explicit racial bias.

- Assessment and grading biases are prevalent in testing and grading practices.
- Lack of access to diverse educators is consequential for all students but particularly for Black students whom Black teachers play a large role in identifying as gifted or not.
- Inequitable access to quality early childhood opportunities contributes to differences in the quality of children’s early childhood experiences and can affect the way educators identify giftedness in young children.
- Lack of communication with families—including lack of communication in families’ home languages—about advanced opportunities makes it unnecessarily difficult for families to find information on the enrollment process. (para 6)

One key finding from this report by The Education Trust (2020) is the fact that Black and Latino students are successful in advanced courses when given the opportunity to enroll in them.

A Gap Exists

It is clear that a gap exists, but it is not clear if school leaders and policymakers realize that there is an opportunity gap for Black students to have the opportunity to enroll in advanced courses. Furthermore, if educational leaders do recognize that a gap exists in their school and/or district, then what are they doing to close the opportunity gap for their Black students? I can see that while some educational leaders recognize that there is a gap in advanced courses, many do not know what to do about it. Understanding that there is a gap and why the gap exists is the starting point for reform (Bryant, 2015). Reform is needed for

the practices used in education, the policies developed in education, and the attitudes of the controlling group if we are to create programs that are accessible to all students.

School counselors are a key group in helping schools open up their curricula to Black students. School counselors are a vital asset to students seeking to enter college after high school graduation. The College Board identifies eight components of college and career counseling for school counselors seeking to inspire and prepare students (The College Board, 2010):

- College Aspirations
- Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness
- Enrichment and Extracurricular Engagement
- College and Career Exploration and Selection Processes
- College and Career Assessments
- College Affordability Planning
- College and Career Admission Processes
- Transition from High School Graduation to College Enrollment (p. 3)

It is very important that the students believe that the counselor genuinely cares about them and wants to help them. Students, especially Black students, are less likely to seek college information if they perceive that the counselor is not interested in helping (Bryant, 2015).

One reason that it is extremely important that the student believes that the counselor has their best interest stems back to middle school when “track placement plays a major role in academic achievement and future success” (Useem, 1992, p. 263). Where curricular choice abounds, as it does in U.S. public schools, parents' knowledge of and involvement in course placement becomes more consequential (Useem, 1992). Sometimes the choices are so

complex that the course information is difficult to understand. Therefore, the system can highlight social-class differences and further widen opportunity and achievement gaps (Useem, 1992). In other words, having choices can be a positive thing, but when the parents do not know how to make sound decisions regarding their child's education it is more detrimental. Students and parents not knowing how to navigate this piece of the educational system is one barrier that many Black students face. An additional obstacle is schools not having enough teachers with the recommended credentials to teach advanced courses and training on how to teach students who are culturally different from them. I provide more details on the need for more qualified teachers in the next section.

Qualified Teachers Needed

Unfortunately, there are too many AP courses being taught by teachers who do not fully meet the College Board's recommendations, which include the teacher having a bachelor's degree in the subject being taught and extensive experience teaching the subject. Most AP courses are taught by teachers who do not have a major in the AP subject they teach—over 24% of the teachers teaching courses in math, science, social studies, and English and it is higher in high-poverty and high-minority schools (Klopfenstein, 2003). Research (Bonner & Goings, 2019; Klopfenstein, 2003; The College Board, 2010) is clear that properly trained and well-educated teachers are necessary if teachers are expected to advocate for students with regard to advanced courses. It is difficult to accomplish this goal when teachers with a four-year degree in the subject matter and extensive experience are in short supply.

Recruiting Teachers: Be Mindful of the Evaluation Instruments

AP teachers should be able to withstand the rigors of substantial evaluation instruments. But, if the goal is to recruit qualified teachers to teach AP courses, then educational leaders

need to be purposeful in how they evaluate AP teachers. In other words, if AP test scores are the sole or major criteria being used to determine an AP teacher's effectiveness, then the school leader should reconsider this strategy. The College Board says that AP scores are not designed for teacher or school evaluation and evaluation instruments should be developed at the local level (Klopfenstein, 2003).

How to Bridge the Gap: Recommendations for Educators

The task for educational leaders is to recognize potentially problematic enrollment practices in advanced high school courses and then determine the best course of action to close the opportunity gap or “reduce the debt” as described by Ladson-Billings (2013, p. 105). In this section, I provide a few possible methods and strategies that educational leaders can implement to create more inclusive recruiting efforts for advanced courses, provide equitable enrollment procedures for advanced courses, and retain Black students in these courses.

Two important ideas educational leaders should accept and believe are that Black students can be successful in advanced courses. If sufficient training and support are provided for educators, these courses offer benefits that extend beyond the confines of any one specific course. Heather Rieman, the P-12 Policy Director at The Education Trust (2020), an organization whose mission is to advocate for high academic achievement of all students, particularly those of color or living in poverty, said:

Black and Latino students can succeed in advanced coursework when given the opportunity. Policymakers can improve the lives of Black and Latino students by implementing meaningful policy changes. Students in advanced

courses have proven to work harder and engage more in school, leading to fewer absences and suspensions, as well as higher graduation rates. (para. 11)

The Education Trust (2020) lists five recommendations for educational leaders and policymakers included in the report and I have summarized them below:

- Set clear and measurable goals
- Use data to identify the barriers for Black students
- States should provide support for schools that predominantly serve Black students

There is never a one size fits all approach that can be successfully applied because every school is different. However, as a result of my research, I present the following suggestions regarding equity-based initiatives for providing access to the advanced curriculum. Administrators should:

- Look closely at their enrollment data for advanced courses.
- Consider and research the perspectives of Black students.
- Provide guidance for teachers regarding the referral process.
- Explore professional development opportunities for staff.
- Consider a community outreach program to educate parents.

If school administrators consider the recommendations that I have outlined from my research and the suggestions highlighted in the literature from other studies, they can tailor an approach that is best suited for their school. Then, they would be better equipped to create an environment that is inclusive for their Black students. The connection between this data and my research is that when schools are led by administrators who are researching strategies

to guide them on how to lead an inclusive school, then Black students are more likely to have the opportunities to access the advanced curriculum that they deserve.

The culture, climate, student populations, community-based needs, etc. can vary greatly from school to school, even within the same school district. Therefore, educational leaders need to discover through research and data dives what is needed in their district and/or school to close the opportunity gap for underrepresented students. However, the five recommendations listed above can serve as a springboard for productive discussions among school administrators who wish to implement more inclusive policies and strategies. As a high school administrator, I find it difficult to ascertain the best balance between maintaining the current successes that our school is experiencing in certain areas while also making adjustments in the areas in which change is needed. Inevitably, a shift in one program or policy affects another program or policy—much like the ripple effect from a stone thrown into a pond. These effects could come in the form of personnel changes, resources being reallocated, or time and physical space allotted to one program instead of another. This is why district and school administrators should follow the data trail and have conversations with stakeholders when revising practices and policies within their educational purview. To that end, Chatterji et al. (2021) propose the following strategies to remove biases and barriers in the identification of students for advanced courses:

- Providing professional development for AP educators
- Vertical alignment to prepare students for advanced coursework in high school
- Waiving test fees for students to take AP exams
- Creating learning communities for teachers and students to support them

Some of these recommended strategies require funding or creative planning and scheduling options for staff, but most can be accomplished without funding. However, when successful, these strategies listed above can help administrators know what steps to take to provide a curriculum where deserving Black students can enjoy the same benefits (i.e. preparing them for the rigors of college and developing time management and study skills) as their white counterparts enjoy when they enroll in advanced courses. School leaders can use the strategies above from Chatterji et al. (2021) in conjunction with my recommendations to create an inclusive atmosphere and curriculum for Black students.

In the district in which I serve in North Carolina, the AP exam fee is waived for students as an added incentive for students to follow through with taking the exam, they receive an extra point on their grade point average as long as they take the exam. Our district and my school strongly encourage Professional Learning Communities (PLC) among teachers, but the organization of the teams is by grade level and/or subject matter, rather than providing training and knowledge for teachers who teach advanced courses. The point is, I would consider my school and district student-centered and very successful, but obviously, there is plenty of room for improvement to be a district and school that truly serves our Black students fairly, equitably, and fully. Chatterji et al. (2021) find that the strategies listed above should be applied to all courses and not just to AP courses:

these strategies are by no means exclusive to AP coursework and should be applied across the board to improve the overall rigor of high school curricula and coursework. This is important because high schools should not rely on simply getting more students into courses designated as advanced, as this can often function as a tracking mechanism. Rather, high schools should aspire to

improve the rigor of all coursework to the level of AP and IB classes to ensure that all students are learning relevant and engaging material that prepares them for college and their careers. (p. 2)

The goal should not only be to raise the numbers enrolled in advanced courses, but to improve the overall rigor of the entire academic program at a school. This is a very important consideration if the academic goal of the school is to prepare well-rounded and fully prepared students who can become well-informed and productive citizens. In turn, these practices lead to a more successful and thriving society. I provide more detail regarding these implications in the next section.

Implications of Critique of AP Courses for Educational Leaders

I believe that AP courses in conjunction with honors-level courses, dual-enrollment courses, and GPA are solid indicators of the potential for college success. My argument is not against these courses, but rather that not all students have equal access to them. Black students and students who are school dependent are more likely to be placed in the lower track early in their academic career, consequently being denied access to the benefits of the upper track and further marginalizing them. The crux of my research is that school leaders need to create a system where Black students are provided access to advanced courses.

To be clear, I do not believe that Pope, in her interview with Donald (2013) is condemning the AP program. She points to more negatives than positives, but she also offers some praise. Donald (2013) includes this point from Pope:

There are some programs that are actually doing a really nice job using the APs as part of a comprehensive school improvement plan with more professional development for teachers and better services for students. But in

many places, where they just plop in the AP program, it may not be helping at all. There's no indication that this is leveling the playing field in those communities. (para 13)

The positive remarks about the AP program are qualified by how a school leader implements it into their curriculum. Further, I read into this statement that schools with better resources (i.e. funding, time, and support) are the ones that are doing a nice job, which means that predominantly white schools are the ones whose students benefit the most from AP courses. As with most things in education, success depends on the fidelity of the program's implementation and how well the school leader monitors it. In other words, it is about leadership providing the proper direction that leads to equal opportunities.

Advanced Placement courses alone are not the stand-alone piece of the high school experience that will guarantee that a student can be successful in college. However, AP courses when taken as part of a comprehensive and rigorous course of study are a strong predictor of a student's ability to succeed in college. I acknowledge that there may be a lack of research showing the cause and effect and that the AP program is not a perfect system, but the fact remains that college admissions teams consider AP courses an important part of a student's high school curriculum. The problem is not with the AP program, but rather it is with who has access to the AP curriculum. More often than not, Black students find themselves excluded from this ever-important college preparatory program. Educational researchers and leaders must put their energy into solving this problem first before they concentrate on the other issues with AP courses.

Why Educators Should Support Enrollment in Advanced Courses

Students who take the most rigorous course of study appropriate for their academic potential are also the most well-prepared students for life after high school—whether they go to college, technical or trade school, the workforce, or the military. The perception among students and many educators is that only college-bound students can benefit from advanced courses—specifically Advanced Placement courses. This misconception needs to change, but that will only happen if educational researchers provide the information and educational leaders share this information with students, educators, and families. The benefits for students of taking advanced courses — honors, dual enrollment, and Advanced Placement — are both tangible and intangible. I posit that there are a multitude of indirect benefits and skills students develop when taking advanced courses.

When students’ thinking and problem-solving skills are fully developed and their ability to make connections is strengthened (which is what happens in AP courses), we have stronger communities due to citizens who are capable of being informed voters, more likely to participate in community service adventures, participate in business and mentorship activities, etc. Patrick et al. (2020) showed that students who enrolled in advanced courses had higher self-esteem than students who did not take advanced courses. Another study showed that students who enroll in advanced courses are more engaged in their studies. These are just two examples of intangible benefits for students who take advanced courses that manifest beyond any one specific course.

Students who take advanced courses typically have fewer absences (Patrick et al. 2020), which if carried over into their lives as they enter the workforce, will allow them to be more productive employees. There are plenty of benefits for students who attend college,

which are often obvious. Still, there are a few that may not be as obvious, because they do not come to fruition until later in students' academic careers. Taking AP and dual-enrollment classes can provide students with the opportunity to earn college credit in high school, which can also offer them more flexibility and potential cost savings in their studies beyond high school (Danneberg & Hyslop, 2019). Another study by Evans (2018) showed a link between AP credits and a shorter time to a college degree and an increased likelihood of college students double majoring and taking advanced math and laboratory science college coursework.

Students are able to accomplish these two feats because the rigors and challenges of high school advanced courses better prepare them for the challenges and rigors at the next academic level. Students who enroll in advanced courses in high school also learn the study skills necessary for success in college. All of these benefits can translate into financial benefits as well. For example, students who entered college with AP credits graduated with significantly less debt, \$40,000 or more, because they were able to graduate sooner—which can be important given that Black students often face higher student loan debt (Baum, 2019). Additionally, research also suggests that high school students who enroll in advanced coursework opportunities are more likely to graduate high school, go on to college, and earn a degree (Montell, 2020).

Despite the plethora of evidence that students experience great personal and academic benefits from enrolling in rigorous academic courses, the fact remains that fewer AP courses are available to Black students in aggregate, and even when courses are available, Black students are less likely to take them (Quinton, 2014). Furthermore, research (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011) suggests that many Black students would have succeeded in AP coursework based

on subsequent standardized test data. Therefore, since the informal pathways related to identification criteria, teacher expectations, and counseling behavior restrict equitable access to AP course offerings for Black students, this topic remains an important issue for both individuals and society as a whole (Theokas & Saaris, 2013).

How Educational Leaders Can Support Students in Advanced Courses

Educational leaders committed to social justice need to understand that providing access to the full curriculum—including honors, AP, and dual-enrollment courses — to all students can pay immediate and long-term dividends for their students and their communities. Anyon (1997) wrote, “heroic attempts to restructure schools or to introduce new pedagogical techniques in the classrooms will be difficult to sustain” (as cited in Love, 2019, p. 19), and even though no type of pedagogy alone can erase the barriers listed above—including homophobia, racism, homelessness, and access to college—it is a worthy and necessary endeavor nonetheless.

These obstacles perpetuate low academic performance by Black students, which in turn continues the cycle of the issues listed above as well as putting schools on notice of closure due to failing grades and scores. The objective to provide rigor and challenge students in *all* courses is an important strategy for the aforementioned goal, because AP courses are not the only courses in which students benefit from being challenged academically. Students do realize benefits and satisfaction as a result of taking AP courses. It is possible for students to gain valuable lessons regardless of the course or level of the course, including dual-enrollment courses that also reap significant academic rewards.

In a study, Ackerman et al. (2013) surmised that the benefits of advanced coursework opportunities are not limited to a certain model. They showed that students enrolled in any of

these advanced classes—especially AP and dual enrollment—have shown significant measures of post-secondary success compared with students who do not take these kinds of courses. If we, as educators, can understand that our Black students have the same dreams of opportunity and success as our white students, then we can begin to see through a liberating lens. Educators can then accept the barriers in place for Black students and take action to eliminate them. Bettina Love (2019) calls this type of teaching “abolitionist teaching” (p. 12). Love (2019) teaches that “abolitionist teaching asks educators to accept America and its policies as anti-Black, racist, discriminatory, and unjust and to be in solidarity with dark folk and poor folk fighting for their humanity and fighting to move beyond surviving” (p. 12). She adds, abolitionist teaching asks educators to “learn about their students’ communities through a historical, intersectional justice lens and to abandon teaching gimmicks like ‘grit’ that represent experiences of dark youth as ahistorical and further pathologize them and evoke collective freedom dreaming” (p. 12). She is talking about building positive relationships with students, specifically, Black students, because typically Black students form a positive student-mentor relationship less often than their white counterparts. She is talking about love, acceptance, joy, and well-being for all Black students.

It is natural for a person to dream about their future and to want the best for themselves, such as a job, nice house, good salary, being able to go on vacations, etc. Black students deserve the opportunity to hold fast to their dreams. Love (2019) writes about Robert D. G. Kelley’s idea of “Freedom Dreaming” (p. 101), which is the idea that Black students have the same dreams of opportunity, success, wealth, and inclusion as their white counterparts, but their dreams are framed by a cyclic struggle to overcome systemic barriers to realize these dreams. Black students need their teachers to “embrace theories such as

critical race theory, settler colonialism, Black feminism, dis/ability, critical race studies, and other critical theories that have the ability to interrogate anti-Blackness and frame experiences with injustice” (Love, 2019, p. 12) to help these students enjoy their dreams of freedom, opportunity, and success.

If one truly has a full understanding of what social justice is and what it truly means to love, find joy, and appreciate their students and their students’ culture, then how can that person not embrace the aforementioned theories and practices as a pathway to these ambitions? It is not unreasonable to expect teachers to capitalize on the diversity of their students to provide the best instruction within a nurturing and inclusive environment. In North Carolina, according to the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards (NCPTS), educators should strive to create an environment where they advocate for students, are respectful to diverse students, and care for and nurture all students (NC Public Schools, 2013). The NCPTS can reveal if a teacher exhibits actions and uses strategies in the classroom conducive to someone who cares for all students and capitalizes on diversity in their classroom.

I understand that this evaluation tool could not possibly fully represent all that a teacher does, but bell hooks (1994) summarized the ideals that the standards and elements encompass when she tells us that “the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom” (p. 207). She is leading us to Love’s (2019) concept of freedom dreams. Hooks goes on to say, if we demand an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, then this is education as the practice of freedom” (p. 207).

We, educators and educational leaders, must love our students and welcome their differences as positive opportunities within the classroom and learn about those differences directly from the students by building positive relationships with students. Without love, the type of teaching that is required to eliminate barriers that our Black students face is more of a pipe dream than a freedom dream. Abolitionist teaching starts with freedom dreaming, dreams grounded in a critique of injustice. According to Love (2019), teachers need to embrace theories such as critical race theory, settler colonialism, Black feminism, dis/ability, critical race studies, and other critical theories that have the ability to interrogate anti-Blackness and frame experiences with injustice, focusing the moral compass toward a North Star that is ready for a long and dissenting fight for educational justice (p. 12).

These dreams are not whimsical, unattainable daydreams, they are critical and imaginative dreams of collective resistance (Love, 2019 p. 101). Teachers, especially white teachers, must be intentional with regard to the environment they create and the strategies they employ because “Race doesn't really exist for you because it has never been a barrier. Black folks don't have that choice” (TED, 2009). If a student feels loved and wanted in the classroom, then they will feel empowered to contribute and motivated to learn. If a student feels empowered to contribute, then they feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas, which in turn leads to deeper learning. If our students are learning deeply by thinking critically, learning how to challenge social injustices, gaining the knowledge necessary to have the courage to challenge social injustices, and learning perseverance, then they can begin to envision their dreams as a possible reality. I dream of a time when race is no longer a barrier for anyone and our Black students are free to dream.

From my research and experience, I have learned that when teachers harbor deficit thoughts about students, then they often assume that those students are less capable and, therefore, fail to fully teach the student. Ford and Grantham (2003) provided several questions (presented in Chapter 2) that teachers can be asked to provide context in an effort to combat deficit-thinking about Black students. My understanding is that the questions are designed to motivate teachers to reflect on their beliefs regarding opportunities in gifted education for Black students in hopes that they will eliminate damaging thoughts and behavior.

Significant Contributions to the Field of Education

The point of an educational research project is to contribute information and knowledge to an aspect of education in such a way that there is an upward shift. The upward shift could be that students are more successful because of a program or strategy that is now used as a result of the data from the research. The upward shift could be that a school is more successful as a result of a new program that was used as a result of the data from the research. In my case, the unique contribution that my research brings to the world of education is the community outreach event that was the first of its kind in our community.

I highlighted the story of four participants who were high school graduates and have either graduated from college or are currently attending a four-year institution. All of these people identify as a person of color, and they all enrolled in honors courses, dual-enrollment courses, and AP courses while in high school. These stories are special, because they belong to the beautiful individuals who shared them with me. These stories make this research unique, because they show us how students can rise above negative perceptions and overcome deficit thinking. This research moves away from damage-centered thinking

because it focused on the successes and the processes navigated to achieve those successes, rather than capitalize on the trauma suffered by these individuals. This research contributes to the advancement of education, because it led to a tangible action where Black students and their families were able to receive information that is typically reserved for white students and families. Black students and their families were provided access to students, educators, and community leaders with whom they could relate and who have faced the same systemic challenges. In turn, Black students and their families learned how to position themselves to conquer these hurdles.

Two remarkable stories stand out and give credence to the uniqueness of this research. The first one is Angela's story, because she started taking advanced courses fairly late in her academic career. She did not begin taking advanced courses until her junior year and still managed to put herself in a position to be accepted into all four-year universities to which she applied. Further, she accomplished this after moving into her seventh home in as many years while in the foster care system. What is even more remarkable is that she was the first college graduate from our home and her biological family despite not being the first of our children to attend college.

The second amazing story is Tony's story because he was declared homeless during his senior year and still managed to finish strong. Tony successfully handled a senior year wrought with multiple dual-enrollment courses and AP courses, while not knowing where he was going to sleep each night until December. He received McKenney-Vento support and slept at our house during the second semester of his senior year, which was his version of stability. Therefore, when Tony tells his story and shares his advice with younger students, he does so with passion and credibility.

My research has disrupted the typical school culture where counselors and administrators have normalized an exclusive environment for Black students to be recruited and enrolled in advanced courses. This has happened by a continued dismissal of the opportunity gap when it has been brought to their attention. Educational leaders try to hide behind their schools' statistics such as test scores, school report cards, and graduation rates to justify the status quo when presented with the idea of changing enrollment procedures and parameters. However, having high marks in all of the aforementioned areas does not prove that a school provides an avenue for *all* of its students to enjoy the same opportunities afforded to those who are traditionally recruited and enrolled in advanced courses.

An additional unique aspect of my work is how I used Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to investigate and problematize the traditional policies and practices used to make curriculum decisions, which contributes to an already exclusive system that continues the erasure of Black students. By using this conceptual framework, I was able to use the community outreach event as an opportunity to transfer insider knowledge about a deficit-inducing system to those considered outsiders, therefore, transferring some of the knowledge and power to our students and families of color.

Limitations and Challenges

Researchers understand that they will face certain challenges and limitations during their projects. Some of these issues can be anticipated, but it is a given that even the most experienced researchers cannot predict every challenge and limitation that they will encounter.

Limitations

Not all limitations are negative. Setting limits is an important aspect to keep qualitative research centered on the main research questions. I struggled to keep the research focused while allowing for flexibility, so that the data could drive the path rather than adhere to a strict outcome. This issue notwithstanding, I encountered a few limitations as a result of the design of this project. I knew that my sample size—four participants and one school from one district—was a limiting factor. However, these four individuals provided rich data. Since I was not interested in specific procedures or programs at different schools, my project was not hindered by the fact that all of the participants attended the same high school. Additionally, more participants would have produced more data but, at the same time, would have complicated the spacing limitation that I faced.

There is much more to be learned about all students of color with regard to data surrounding advanced courses, but I wanted to focus specifically on Black students. I provide more detail in a subsequent section, but if I were to continue working on this project, then I would consider including Latinx and additional Black students in the study as well.

Challenges

Even with only four participants, it was very difficult to find convenient times for all of us to meet in person for the focus group sessions. All of the participants were as accommodating as possible, but their busy schedules made finding a common meeting very challenging. Also, I found it difficult to remain consistently connected with the participants. I attribute part of this to their age and part to their busy schedules.

One challenge that came up early was that one participant decided to discontinue in the study after the first initial meeting. This was a setback that I did not foresee. I am thankful for

the protections and parameters that were in place that allowed this person to feel comfortable in withdrawing from the study. A situation such as this is a good supporting example for the IRB review process.

I heard a lot of overlapping information from the participants, which connected with the literature on the topic. The volume of literature (Bonner & Goings, 2019; Capper, 2019; Ford, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995) supporting my research findings reinforces my premise that Black students do not have the same educational opportunities and experiences as their white counterparts.

Ideas for Future Research

As with any research project, there are several additional ideas I would consider if I continue this work. A few of the more obvious avenues to pursue would be to include additional students of color, considering the intersectionality of being female, exploring other academic programs, and expanding the participant pool to include participants from multiple schools and school districts. For example, this research can be improved by including Latinx, Asian, and additional bi-racial students in the study. I would also be interested to see if Asian students report similar data or if their experiences are different from the Black students' stories in this research study.

One aspect of this study that I did not originally consider researching is how students can gain access to alternative schools or educational programs, such as Early College, Online Academies, adult learning programs, etc. One last thing that I did not investigate in my study but I think would be interesting is how Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) influence enrollment decisions in advanced courses. I had to limit the parameters that I chose to focus

on to keep the project-centered, but these additional considerations are excellent avenues to explore for future research projects.

Plans for Future Community Outreach Events

I am committed to organizing a community outreach event in the future. The plan is to expand and host it at two different sites next year. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the community stakeholders who collaborated with this year's event have already agreed to hold the event next year. I have been contacted by other community leaders to host an event in a neighboring city. Therefore, an important positive consequence of the community outreach program is that seeds have been planted and community leaders are committed to cultivating these seeds by expanding the reach of these change-oriented initiatives.

Knowing what I know now and having experienced all of the highs and lows during the process of creating this dissertation, I would repeat these efforts. that I was able to put my research into action and produce the desire for future events proves to me that this work is as important as I originally believed. Therefore, I am motivated to continue this work.

A Final Look Back at the Journey

Writing this dissertation has been a long and satisfying journey. I have learned much—some of which was expected and some of which was unexpected. I have been particularly excited about the unforeseen knowledge and lessons that I have learned. I learned a lot about qualitative research and letting the data develop organically through the shared experiences with the participants. I was not able to remove myself from this research and the project took on the persona of the collective whole of participants and collaborators. I would not have been capable of that at the outset of my coursework, but this shift has created a better, more observant, and understanding school leader.

I have learned many lessons throughout this process that have improved my leadership abilities, but the acquired knowledge that has had the greatest impact is the information that has changed me as a person. My eyes have been opened to a myriad of microaggressions that I previously did not notice, because I was focused on my limitations and moves to innocence rather than genuine equity and inclusion. I notice things such as street signs and names of neighborhoods that are rooted in colonizing traditions. I notice statements such as, “Even though I know they are not honors material, I need my child in the honors classes to keep them away from the riff-raff,” often made by white parents who may not believe these kinds of statements are damaging but are harmful nonetheless. I notice decisions made to deny access to an alternative educational setting for a student of color with an IEP under the guise that the program is full or the student did not meet the criteria. In reality, there was somehow still room for a white student. I recognize my newfound awareness as a blessing because I am driven to make changes personally and professionally in my thinking to help create a more equitable and socially-just corner of society.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I presented the problem of the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced courses in high school. This opportunity gap is common across the U.S. as evidenced by the plethora of research (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Johnson & Larwin, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ndura et al., 2003) that currently exists. I detailed the specific data from one high school. I selected four former students—two of them identify as females and two of them identify as males—from this high school to participate in this study.

As I conclude this project, my main desire is that practitioners understand that Black students are underrepresented in advanced courses but, at the same time, realize that the data

and strategies that I have presented enhance their ability to address the opportunity gap. I intend that this work will inspire educational leaders to organize their community outreach events aimed to transfer some of the power that we hold as white educators to our students and families of color by providing practical knowledge of how to navigate our educational system. I look forward to seeing if my goals become reality and, if so, how. I also look forward to looking for future opportunities to extend the capacity of this crucial work.

Conclusion: Freedom Dreams

Education can be the great equalizer, but only if administered and facilitated in an environment where all students can flourish. A common thread running through all of these ideas is that educating and contributing to a socially-just society go hand in hand and are not passive activities. Rather, educators must take action now to effect positive change. Love (2019) argues that the lack of funding for schools and programs that primarily serve Black students has been normalized to the point that students and families served by institutions in these situations are forced to doubt the possibility of change. This lack of hope spreads throughout schools and communities. It is up to educational leaders to disrupt this state of hopelessness and perpetuate a different message of support to Black students and their families.

As educators and educational leaders, we cannot continue to sit idly by and allow the status quo to prevail by continuing to ignore the injustices suffered by Black students. The South did not want the people to be educated because they knew that an educated person, especially an oppressed person, was a dangerous person. The South was not completely wrong, because education among all kinds of people always had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent (Du Bois, 1903). Love

(2020) tells her readers that “a requirement for liberation as one refuses victim status is an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change” (p. 101). The controlling group does not want creative, free-thinkers who have emerged from slavery and oppression, because then power will undoubtedly shift in the favor of the marginalized and underrepresented. Education is a foundational beginning for marginalized people to begin shifting power in their favor. The time has come for the controlling class to stop being afraid of relinquishing a piece of their power and face their own moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The time has come for educational leaders to find the courage to challenge what needs to be challenged, say what needs to be said, and do what needs to be done. The time has come for educational leaders, researchers, and teachers to embrace the opportunity to reject inequitable enrollment procedures in advanced courses and begin providing access to all academic programs to Black students in our schools. Because if we do not give these students a fair and equal chance, then we rob them of their future and a stronger, more vibrant and healthy society as a whole. We rob them of their Freedom Dreams!

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Appendix A

Research Recruiting Letter

Hello,

I am writing to ask if you would be interested in participating in a study about underrepresented students in advanced courses in high school. For the purpose of this study, “advanced courses” will be defined as honors-level courses, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and dual-credit courses (we called them CCP courses when you attended KMHS).

The main research question:

- *Why is there a disproportionate number of students of color in advanced courses (i.e. AP, honors, and dual-enrollment) in high school?*

The secondary research questions:

- *What are your perceptions before and after enrolling in advanced courses; how would you describe your experiences in the classes; and what benefits do you believe you were provided as a result of following a rigorous course of study in high school?*
- *What research and knowledge gaps exist that if filled would motivate educational leaders to shift their thinking and move away from limiting practices?*
- *What perceptions do students of color have regarding honors, AP, and CCP courses, and do they understand the benefits of taking such courses?*

The activities will consist of an initial meeting as a large group and a few meetings for individuals and/or pairs, whichever the participants would prefer. The meetings can be attended in person or via Zoom. In the initial meeting, I will provide an overview of the project, what I hope to accomplish and how, your role, your right to stop participating, how I will store and disseminate information, and we will discuss our code of ethics and conduct.

You will be free to use your name or remain anonymous by choosing an alias to use for this study.

Participation is completely and 100% voluntary. You may choose to participate in as many or few of the meetings as you wish, you may choose to answer as many or as few questions as you wish, and you may choose to stop participating at any time. You will not be asked to share anything that you are not comfortable sharing.

If you agree to participate, I will be in contact with you regarding our opening meeting. Please provide your preferred contact information below, which will be kept confidential. Please, only provide the contact information that you wish for me to use (if it is both, then that is o.k.).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jon Fleisher
fleisherje@appstate.edu
(704) 300-1156

First Name (Preferred Name)	Last Name
Contact Information - Phone (for texting)	Email Address

Addendum to the Recruiting Letter - Points to cover in the opening meeting

I plan to meet with each participant at least twice—once in a big group with all members present and at least with each person individually or as a pair if they would prefer to meet together. The purpose of the big group meeting is to provide detailed information regarding the purpose for the study, the intended procedures/methods to be used, how I envision the study unfolding, how I see the participants contributing to the project, and to allow for open-ended input from the participants regarding the topic and my study.

Talking Points for the Opening Meeting (Big Group)

- Participation is VOLUNTARY and you may choose to stop at any time in the process
- You may choose to use your real name or you may choose to remain anonymous
- All information will be recorded in note form or audio recording (NO Video recording will be used)
- You will have full access to all information related to you and this information will be kept secure via a secure google drive administered by ASU
 - You will have access to information/knowledge that was recorded while you were participating
 - Remember - you will be given the opportunity to share in a big group and in smaller groups consisting of you as an individual or in pairs if you and another participant feel more comfortable meeting together.
 - This information will be secure, password protected, and monitored by ASU
- If you have any concerns at any time, then you are free to discuss those concerns with me, my supervision faculty member (Dr. Kimberly Money), the director of the Doctoral Program at ASU (Dr. Vachel Miller), or the Internal Review Board (IRB). Contact information is listed below. It is extremely important to me that you are comfortable and free from any and all pressure at all times during this study. The people listed above can help if you are not comfortable with something you are being asked to do and you feel it is more appropriate to discuss the issue with someone other than me.

- At the conclusion of this meeting, we will schedule times to meet as individuals (or in pairs)
- Describe the project/study
 - Introduce the “big” research question and the auxiliary questions
 - Describe what I hope to accomplish
 - Explain what a code of ethics is (our Statement that we will “live by” during this project)
 - Explain that I want us a group to develop our own code of ethics (see below some starting points)
- Describe the *intended* timeline
 - June - October
 - Meet, collect data, pull out common themes
 - Write, rewrite, and meet again to gain clarification regarding the information
 - Provide opportunities for participants to add/delete information
 - Review/revise/edit with the committee
 - Reiterate that this is an intended timeline and can change at any time depending on my status, their status, the direction in which the study goes based on the research
- Schedule Individual Meetings after the ethics discussion

CODE OF ETHICS

1. We agree to be respectful of each other’s thoughts and information at all times and hold this information confidential
2. We are free to share as much or as little as we desire
3. We are free to stop participating at any time
4. We are not required as a part of this study to return any favors to anyone involved (Primary Investigator or participants)
5. We do not have any expectation of compensation for participating in this study
6. We are aware that I will have access to the notes and information which I share at any time and this information will be stored in a password-protected document on the ASU Secure Drive

Other Options to Consider (My suggestions)

- A. We would like access to information, writing, results, etc. at any time during the process (participants can ask to see what I intend to include in the final document beforehand OR they can only ask to see the final product before it is published OR they can simply ask to see it after it is finished)
 1. I will present all of these options
- B. We have the option of meeting as many times as we wish
- C. We have the option to retract (or not include) information at any time
- D. We have the freedom to suggest subtopics and influence the direction of the study.

Other Options to Consider (Participants' Suggestions)

This will be an open discussion for us as a group to add/delete anything that the participants would like to include in our code of ethics.

Open Discussion

Opportunity for anyone to discuss/add anything they would like to share

Final Statement

I am governed by an internal review board whose sole purpose is to ensure you are subjected to maximum reward and minimal risk. Please know that it is my sole intention to gather information in the most harmless manner possible and if at any time you are uncomfortable, then please let me know immediately. If you are not comfortable talking to me, then you may contact any one of the people listed above and they will help you. While I hope to gather helpful information from each and every one of you, I do not wish to do so at the expense of your physical, mental, or social well-being. Your comfort, safety, and protection during this process are my number one priority!

Thank you for your time and for participating if you choose to do so.

Appendix B

Information to Consider about this Research

Challenging the Status Quo of Enrollment Practices for Advanced Courses in High School

Principal Investigator: Jon E. Fleisher
Department: Educational Leadership, Reich College of Education
Contact Information: Jon E Fleisher
101 Marcella Dr, Kings Mountain, NC 28086
(704) 300 - 1156
fleisherje@appstate.edu

Dissertation Chairperson: Dr. Kimberly Money
Assistant Professor, School Administration
Dept. of Leadership and Education Studies
Appalachian State University, RCOE
(828) 262-8380
moneykd@appstate.edu

Invitation/Summary

You are invited to participate in a research study about the underrepresentation of students of color in advanced courses in high school. For the purpose of this study, advanced courses will be defined as honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and dual-enrollment courses. The main research question is:

Why is there a disproportionate number of students of color in advanced courses (i.e. AP, honors, and dual-enrollment) in high school?

During the project I hope to learn more about your experiences, perspectives, benefits, and recommendations as a result of enrolling in and completing these courses while you were in high school. I would like to learn about your experiences with the school's recruitment and retention process, if you feel that you benefitted from your experiences, and how, if so, you benefitted. I believe that we are all collaborators on this project; therefore, you will have direct and significant input in the direction in which this study progresses and how the information is used and presented.

If you agree to participate in this study, then you will be asked to participate in interviews, participate in focus groups, answer questionnaires, and possibly collaborate on document analysis and readings. We will meet as a whole group two to four times and in small groups and/or individually two to four times. These meetings will have an in-person and a virtual option. The purpose of the group meetings is as follows:

- Introductions
- Overview of the research project
- Develop our guiding principles and code of ethics to which we will adhere
- Brainstorm additional aspects we should consider

The small group and individual meetings will serve to provide deeper data collection regarding information that the individual participants wish to remain confidential.

Focus Group

You are being asked to take part in a focus group. The group will have about 2-5 members if everyone agrees to participate in the small group setting and will last for about 60-90 mins for each session. During that time, you and the other group members will be asked questions about your opinions and experiences with advanced courses while you were in high school. Please do not share what is said during the group discussion with people who are not in the group. We also ask that you please do not share private identifiable information about anyone during the focus group making sure that you adhere to our group-defined and agreed-upon code of ethics.

The individual benefits of this research study are, for the most part, unforeseen since each person benefits from various activities for different reasons and at different levels. Some participants may benefit greatly as a result of personal reflection, story sharing, group camaraderie, and inclusion in something that can be considered a greater good while some participants may feel like they did not experience any personal benefits. However, there is great potential for students of color in our schools to benefit from the research we will do in this project.

Risk/Discomfort for the Focus Groups

The main risk of participating in a focus group is loss of confidentiality. Although all participants are instructed to respect the privacy and confidentiality of others in the focus group, we cannot guarantee that the information you share will be kept confidential by other participants. You will not be asked or pressured to share anything that you are not comfortable sharing, so please keep this in mind when choosing what to share with the group.

Interviews

I would like to interview you about your experiences with advanced courses in high school — your interactions with peers, your interaction with teachers, and your perceptions about these courses and the benefits of taking such courses. This interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and last approximately 60-90 mins.

Risk/Discomfort during the Interviews

Some of the questions the interviewer will ask may be upsetting or make you feel uncomfortable. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer and you can stop at any time. [Also see Breach of Confidentiality above]

By participating in this research study, you understand that there is no expectation of monetary compensation. However, you will receive a gift card at the initial group meeting and will be yours to keep regardless of your participation from that point forward.

The expectation of participation

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose to only participate in part of the activities (i.e you may choose to only answer some questions, you may choose to only participate in some meetings, etc.).

If you have any questions or concerns, then you may contact me (Jon Fleisher - Principal Investigator) or my faculty advisor (Dr. Kimberly Money) using the contact information listed above.

The Appalachian University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has determined that this study is exempt from IRB Oversight.

By continuing to participate in the research procedures, I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years, have read the above information, and agree to participate.

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD



Office of Research Protections

ASU Box 32068

Boone, NC 28608

828.262.2692

Web site: <http://researchprotections.appstate.edu>

Email: irb@appstate.edu

Federalwide Assurance (FWA)

#00001076

To: Jon Fleisher
Educational Leadership
CAMPUS EMAIL

From: IRB Administration

Date: 5/24/2022

RE: Notice of Exempt Research Determination

Agrants #:

Grant Title:

STUDY #: 22-0257

STUDY TITLE: Challenging the Status Quo of Enrollment Practices for Advanced Courses in High School

Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation

This study involves no more than minimal risks and meets the exemption category or categories cited above. In accordance with the 2018 federal regulations regarding research with human subjects [45 CFR 46] and University policy and procedures, the research activities described in the study materials are exempt from IRB review.

PLEASE NOTE: We are scheduled to lose access to IRBIS at the end of May 2022. Prior to the end of this month, please download the final versions of the study attachments, a PDF of the

exempted submission, and a PDF of the approval letter from IRBIS at <https://appstate.myresearchonline.org/irb/> to retain for your records. All of these materials will be necessary if you wish to leave yourself the opportunity to make changes to this research in the future (only the shell data will be transferred to the new system, so a legacy submission that includes the described IRBIS records will be required in Cayuse prior to the submission of any modification request for this study).

What an exempt determination means for your project:

1. Research Protections staff have determined that your project constitutes research with human subjects, but that your research is exempt from IRB review per [45 CFR 46.104](#).
2. The following changes require further review by our office, please submit a modification if you intend to change any of the following about your study:
 - the addition of a funding source;
 - the addition of a potential for a conflict of interest;
 - a change in location of the research (i.e., country, school system, off site location);
 - change in contact information for the Principal Investigator,
 - the addition of non-Appalachian State University faculty, staff, or students to the research
 - team, or

Changes to study procedures. If you plan to change your study procedures, you must submit a modification for further review prior to changing the study procedures.

Investigator Responsibilities: All individuals engaged in research with human participants are responsible for compliance with University policies and procedures, and IRB determinations. The Principal Investigator (PI), or Faculty Advisor if the PI is a student, is ultimately responsible for ensuring the protection of research participants; conducting sound ethical research that complies with federal regulations, University policy and procedures; and maintaining study records.

To Close the Study: When research procedures with human participants are completed and all identifiable private information has been destroyed, please submit a Request for Closure form.

If you have any questions, please email irb@appstate.edu or contact the Director of Research

Protections at (828) 262-2692.

Important Links for Exempt Research:

1. Standard Operating Procedure for exempt research (#9):
https://researchprotections.appstate.edu/sites/default/files/sop_9_revision_2_signed.pdf
2. IRB website: <https://researchprotections.appstate.edu/human-subjects>

Appendix D

Photography and Video Recording Authorization

With your permission, still pictures (photos) and/or video recordings taken during the study may be used in research presentations of the research findings. Please indicate whether or not you agree to have photos or videos used in research presentations by reviewing the authorization below and signing if you agree.

Authorization

I hereby release, discharge, and agree to save harmless Appalachian State University, its successors, assigns, officers, employees or agents, any person(s) or corporation(s) for whom it might be acting, and any firm publishing and/or distributing any photograph or video footage produced as part of this research, in whole or in part, as a finished product, from and against any liability as a result of any distortion, blurring, alteration, visual or auditory illusion, or use in composite form, either intentionally or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in the recording, processing, reproduction, publication or distribution of any photograph, videotape, or interview, even should the same subject me to ridicule, scandal, reproach, scorn or indignity. I hereby agree that the photographs and video footage may be used under the conditions stated herein without blurring my identifying characteristics.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Appendix E

Questionnaires

Thank you for participating in this study. You are being provided a copy of these questions before the initial meeting so that you may look them over and have an opportunity to formulate your thoughts. You may also submit answers via this form at any time.

Individual Questions

Reminders

You may choose to use your real name or you may choose to remain anonymous by selecting an alias.

You may choose to answer as many or as few questions as you wish.

You may choose to stop participating at any given time.

For the purposes of this study, Advanced Courses will be defined as honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and dual-credit courses (i.e. CCP for KMHS students).

What is your full name?

What name do you prefer to be called?

Do you want to use your real name or an alias for this project?

What gender did you identify with during your time as a student?

What personal pronouns would you prefer (she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/their)?

With what race do you identify most closely?

Can you describe your family background/history? (i.e. parents, siblings, education history of parents, behavior expectations, etc. - anything you are willing to share about your family)

Are you currently a student at a post-secondary educational institution? If yes, what is your intended major?

If you have graduated from a college/university and you are working in your field, then what are your career goals?

Did you take advanced courses while in high school? _____ If yes, please list the subject(s) and level(s) (i.e. Math I Honors, AP US History, AP Calculus, CCP Biology, etc).

This is the space to answer questions you were not comfortable answering in the group meetings (a copy of those questions has been provided in this session).

This is the space to add any information that we have not discussed yet.

Large Group Questions

Reminders

You may choose to use your real name or you may choose to remain anonymous by either choosing an alias.

You may choose to answer as many or as few questions as you wish.

You may choose to stop participating at any given time.

For the purposes of this study, Advanced Courses will be defined as honors, Advanced Placement (AP), and dual-credit courses (i.e. CCP for KMHS students).

If you remember, at what age did you first enter into a gifted program at school (i.e. AIG in elementary school or honors classes in high school)?

If you remember, were you identified/recruited into the gifted program by school personnel; did you automatically qualify; did you self-advocate; did your parents advocate for you?

Were the benefits of being in such programs/courses explained to you? Can you remember any details of what you were told?

Can you elaborate on your experiences, describe what it was like to be in courses, describe how you were treated by friends, teachers, family (the same, differently), etc? For example, did you feel completely comfortable in these classes? Did you feel that your individual perspective and experiences were valued? Did you ever feel uncomfortable?

This is the space to let the conversation flow among the members of the group and the direction of the information develop organically and add any information that we have not discussed yet.

Appendix F

Advertisement Flyer for the Community Outreach Event

Community Outreach Day:
Discovering the personal, educational, and societal benefits of advanced courses as well as how to register for them

SAT. JANUARY 21ST
10AM-11AM

BETHWARE ELEMENTARY

We Welcome,
ALL 7-11TH GRADE STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS/ GUARDIANS

Agenda

- 10:00-10:20
Opening Information & Presentations
- 10:20-10:50
Question & Answer Panel
- 10:50-11:00
Refreshments & Informal Conversations

Come learn how to
Thrive and Survive

Appendix G

Exit Survey for the Community Outreach Event

Please take a few moments to fill out this short survey to help us plan for next year.

How did you hear about this event? (Example - KM Elite, Church, Facebook, etc.)

What did you expect/hope to learn today and did you learn it? _____

What did you learn that you think will be useful? _____

What did you not learn today that you hoped you would learn? _____

What would you like to see us do differently next year? _____

Thank you for attending today. If you have any questions, then please feel to reach out to Jon Fleisher at fleisherje@appstate.edu or jefleisher@clevelandcountyschools.org

THANK YOU

Vita

Jon Earl Fleisher was born in Peoria, IL to Kenneth Lee and Marylin Sue Fleisher and grew up in Canton, IL. He graduated from Canton High School in June 1988. The following autumn, he entered Southern Illinois University as an undecided-major student. In the fall of 1991, he transferred to MacMurray College to study mathematics, physics, and secondary education and was awarded the Bachelor of Science in December 1994. In January 1995, he began his career as a secondary teacher of science and mathematics and coach of multiple sports. He began studying toward a Master of School Administration at Appalachian State University in August 2005, awarded in May 2007. In August 2007, Mr. Fleisher began his career as an administrator at Kings Mountain High School in Kings Mountain, NC. He also began his study toward an Educational Specialist in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University, which he was awarded in May 2009. In August 2009, Mr. Fleisher commenced work toward his Doctorate in Educational Leadership, but had to suspend this pursuit after three semesters. He again began work toward his Ed.D. in August 2019 at Appalachian State University and was awarded the degree in May 2023.

Mr. Fleisher continues his education career as a high school administrator. He lives in Kings Mountain, NC with his wife of 28 years. Mr. and Mrs. Fleisher have four adult children.