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AN ANALYSIS OF THE UNDERREPRESENTATON OF BLACK STUDENTS IN THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAM: IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTSECONDARY ACCESS

by
Faye L. Lewis

A Dissertation

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Dissertation Chair: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

Dedication

My husband, Darren…I'm back!

Maya and Alexa, I promise - no more dissertation talk…until you decide to write yours…

'Where are you going *now*, mommy?!'), "I've got them, babe. They'll be fine." For that, I am so thankful. I could never find another "you."

To Maya and Alexa, my beautiful, incredibly, smart, adorable little girls. You were the impetus for this journey. It was important for me to show you, not tell you, that as women, we are strong, mighty, and unstoppable. You come from a great lineage of proud and resilient people, some of whom did not have access to a formal education, but they pressed on and worked hard. Many of our family members, however, hold degrees from institutions of higher learning in a number of different fields (the sciences, technology, law, and education, to name a few). With that in mind, always remember that you stand on the shoulders of many great men and women, so be daring, bold, and smart about your life choices. You will find that when you open yourselves up to life's possibilities, the universe will respond to you. Stand tall, be confident, and most importantly, follow your passion. You are my inspiration, and I love you both with all of my heart.

George Albert Saul, my father, "the eldest son," and the hardest working man that I know. As a young girl, I did not truly understand the depth of the sacrifices that you made for all of us. Today, as an adult with my own children, I have a very clear understanding of what you did and why. All that we had to do was ask, and if you could, you did. I am so proud to be your daughter and a member of the Saul "klan."

To my mother, Eunice Anita Saul, you were always a strong proponent of school choice. Although choice was embedded in the educational system in England where I began my educational journey, you were bound and determined to make the BEST possible choice. For as long as I can remember, you advocated for us – seeking out the

best schools and encouraging our love of books and learning. I learned from you how to do the same for my children. Thank you for being such a truly selfless, knowing, loving mother.

Abstract

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2013
MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.
Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership

Using a qualitative approach, this study explored the factors that contribute to the

underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program. The sample was comprised of

12 Black students who attended a suburban public high school in New Jersey. Seven of

the participants were enrolled in AP classes and five were enrolled in Honors classes.

Themes unique to the AP group were: discomfort and isolation in AP courses and teacher

expectations. The theme that emerged from the non AP student interviews was comfort in

Honors. Themes common to both groups were: lack of AP information, the impact of

guidance counselors, the MAC Community, parental support, and self-efficacy. Themes

also emerged based upon gender.

Recommendations for how educators might begin to improve the learning

landscape for students included the elimination of tracking, or the reduction of the

number of levels (tracks). Secondly, it was determined that students and their parents

should be provided with AP information beginning in middle school. Lastly, the results

of the study suggest that counselors should develop more inclusive recruitment practices,

so that information relative to the AP program is made available to all students.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Shortly after taking office in 2008, President Obama set the nation's sights on his ambitious 2020 goal of leading the world in the proportion of college graduates produced by American colleges and universities. According to current college graduation rate data, only 50% of college students obtain a bachelors degree, and academic rigor in high school is one of the most important factors in college completion (Adelman, 1999). Therefore, it is clear that the path to college completion must begin with a focus on providing all students access to rigorous courses in k-12 school districts across the nation. If educators commit to setting high standards that prepare students for the academic and skills based challenges of college and the workforce, the President's goal can indeed be achieved.

One of the pathways to meeting this goal is embedded in how states are now permitted to implement the mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which has governed elementary and secondary education for more than a decade. While awaiting the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the U.S. Department of Education, under the leadership of Secretary Arne Duncan, announced that State Educational Agencies (SEAs) could choose to be released from certain requirements of NCLB and have the flexibility to lead their own reform efforts. As of February 2012, 37 states had submitted requests for waivers from specific provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act. With the overarching goals of advancing equity and raising standards, states have committed to improving student learning and increasing the

quality of instruction through their own rigorous, comprehensive, state developed plans (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These plans are expected to raise expectations for all students, incorporate student growth into accountability systems, measure teacher and principal effectiveness based upon multiple measures, and ultimately accelerate the achievement of all students, thereby closing achievement gaps.

The task faced by educators at all levels is how to move beyond theory and advance toward practices for improving achievement and engaging in the work of increasing college enrollment and graduation. As such, scholars have determined that the work must begin at the k-12 level, as the key determinants to college admission include: having college plans by the 7th grade; attending a college focused middle and high school; having a family that expects its children to attend college and can help them develop and implement plans to go to college; and having competent college advisors (McDonough, 2005). Thus, if we expose students to a college going culture while they are in middle school, and, at the same time, prepare them for the rigors of high school, the number of students who participate in programs such as the Advanced Placement (AP) program, and the number of students who are admitted to and persist through college, will likely increase.

As educators advance through this work, we must remember that the achievement gap challenge is not limited to struggling learners in poor school districts, but is also quite evident in middle class and affluent school systems. This became apparent through the disaggregation of district data, one of the provisions of the NCLB law, which highlighted gaps that existed in high performing districts. What resulted was that educators were compelled to examine their data through a more discerning lens. The data revealed, in

many instances, a gap that existed between White and Black students across grade levels,
subject areas, and school districts. Similarly, Ford High School, the site of this study, and
a relatively affluent, integrated High School, had its own achievement gap issues between
Black and White students in all advanced classes, in particular, the Advanced Placement
(AP) classes (State of the District, 2011, 2012). Upon close examination of Ford High
School's AP enrollment numbers, the difference between the numbers of White students
who participate, vis a vis the numbers of Black students who participate, indicate that
Black students are significantly underrepresented. This is cause for concern as
participation in the AP program provides students with an opportunity to engage in
rigorous college level coursework (College Board, 2009), and is an entry point for
college and career success.

The achievement gap and college access gap are just two of the challenges faced
by stakeholders at Ford High School, a pseudonym and the site of this study. While
district employees and community members often focus achievement gap matters solely
on struggling learners, there is evidence that the issues of equity and access cross
academic ability and seep into the AP program populated by our highest achieving
students. Ford High School is certainly an example of this phenomenon, while Black
students make up 52% percent of the student body, only 10% are enrolled in AP courses.
In many courses, the percentage is even lower than 10% (see Appendix A). In the AP Art
History course, 32 students are enrolled; 6% or 2 students in this class are Black. Of the
33 students registered for AP calculus, 5 students, or 15%, are Black. In AP chemistry,
two students out of 22, or 9% are Black. One hundred and twenty nine students are
enrolled in AP English Language and Composition, 23, or 17%, are Black. AP European

History has an enrollment of 41 students, and 2, or 4% are Black. The numbers show an increase in the Government and Politics course – 19 students are enrolled with 6 Black students, or 31%. AP French Language has the highest number of Black students enrolled – 13 students are enrolled and 8 are Black. Upon further investigation, I determined that the majority of the Black students enrolled in this course are of Haitian descent, and therefore speak French Creole and/or French, so this could perhaps account for the unusually high number of Black students on the roster for this course.

White students are 38% of the student body, but are enrolled in AP courses at a rate of 54% percent. Conversely, the Black population is 52% of the student body, yet are only 10% of the students in Advanced Placement courses. Consequently, the data suggest that an access gap exists for Black students and is indicative of a much deeper, pervasive, national problem. The inability to gain access to the most rigorous courses facilitates and exacerbates achievement gaps because students who lack exposure to the rigor and academic experience that is gained from participating in advanced level courses will be relegated to low level classes requiring less critical thinking and lower expectations (Haycock, 2001).

A few years ago, a local reporter won a prestigious award for a documentary that she wrote based upon achievement disparities at Ford High School. Her work sought to examine why White students fared better than their Black classmates, and during her investigation, district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and students were interviewed to determine what their thoughts were regarding the Ford High academic gap. What she found when she walked the halls of the high school was that classes were clearly separated by race, with Black students dominating the lower levels and White students

filling most of the seats in the advanced classes. Her escort for the day, a Ford High

student, invited her to play a game called *guess the level* (of the course)*.* The journalist

was asked to guess the level of the course based upon the race of students who dominated

the classrooms. She figured out rather quickly how to play the game and learned that in

classes where Black students were the dominant race, the class was designated as a lower

level course. The opposite was true for classes dominated by White students. In most

cases, these were honors and AP courses. The exception to the *guess the level* game was

the AP French Language course which, as previously mentioned, has a majority

enrollment of Black students.

Following the release of the documentary, and buoyed by the reporter's

observations and findings, the Superintendent of Schools convened a 60 person task force

to examine the causes and possible solutions of the achievement gap. Specifically, the

group was tasked with making a determination about how the leveling system, which

begins in the middle school, might perpetuate the gap. Although the reporter did not

arrive at any solid conclusions, she did surmise that movement from one level to the next

was rigid and lacked fluidity. This was an important conclusion, because if the system

makes it difficult for students to advance through the levels, how are students who are

currently in the lower levels expected to excel? Equally as important is the question of

how district officials can be expected to close gaps if students are faced with roadblocks

when they attempt to move up in levels. Through her work, she determined that the

district's system of tracking did nothing to aid the problems associated with the gap. In

fact, tracking exacerbates the gap (Oakes, 1985), and at Ford High, this is illustrated by

the low number of Black students enrolled in high level classes.

Tracking, or sorting students into academic groups or levels, adds another dimension to the AP access problem, as students from low-income backgrounds and people of color (primarily African Americans and Latino students) have been consistently left out of programs and courses designed for the gifted and talented and are more often relegated to lower tracks (Oakes & Lipton, 1990). In these low tracks, students are exposed to a different type of instruction and curriculum based on their track placement (Oakes, 1985, 1990a). Today, tracking and ability grouping that result in unequal access to challenging courses helps to explain the significant gulf in achievement between African American students and White students (Oakes, 1985, 1990b, 1990c).

The tracking system at Ford High School funnels students into five different class levels: level 2, level 3, honors, advanced honors, and the Advanced Placement program. Black students are the majority (90%) of the students in levels 2 and level 3, while in the honors, advanced honors, and Advanced Placement classes only 40% of the enrolled students are Black. In 2011, this de facto segregation led to the filing of an official complaint by the local unit of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) against the district, which argued that the numbers indicate that students are being unfairly segregated based upon their race. The NAACP further contended that Advanced Placement courses and honors classes should exist within a de-tracked school district. Last year, the district voted to de track seventh grade in both middle schools, and beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, Social Studies classes will be offered starting at the honors level with supplemental programs in place to support students who require additional assistance. Math and Science courses will remain unchanged.

The fact that the gap exists more than 50 years after the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case is particularly perplexing and suggests that the intersection of class and race continues to have a negative impact on student achievement. As Saddler (2005) states, "The shortcomings of the legal remedy is glaringly evident; laws cannot legislate the thinking and core beliefs of those it governs" (p. 51). Ladson-Billings (2006) theorizes that the education debt plays a significant role in the lack of Black student representation in the Advanced Placement program due to a historical lack of access and education afforded to Black people since slavery. This lack of access has left many students behind and unable to gain the traction necessary to move forward. What is particularly sobering is her historical context that details how Black people in America were not provided with a universal secondary education until 1968, one of the reasons she attributes to the continued marginalization of Black students.

Ford (1998) analyzes school practices and structural barriers that contribute to the national underrepresentation of minority students in the AP program despite attempts to change policies and procedures so that opportunities are available for Black students. Without these much needed changes, there are serious implications for Black students, as the results will continue to be severe, with the most damaging being deficient college readiness skills and low rates of college persistence. It is estimated that minorities in the United States are underrepresented in gifted programs by 20%-50% (Ford et al., 2000), and despite the fact that African Americans represent 16% of the total American school population, only 8% of our gifted programs are comprised of Black students (Ford, 1995). Ultimately, the most significant and costly ramifications for students who are not

exposed to the rigors of higher level courses are connected to their life chances, job skills, and future employment opportunities.

For many Black students, enrollment in integrated school districts does not ameliorate achievement gap issues. Diamond (2006) found that although Black students in integrated suburbs almost always outperformed students in urban schools, gaps still remain in their grades, test scores, and course selection, and African Americans were more likely to be placed in vocational educational programs that train them for low status occupations (Oakes, 1985, 1990a, 1990b). There are 13 students enrolled in the vocational program enrollment at Ford High School: Black students are 53%, Hispanic are 23%, White students are 15%, and Asians are 7%.

Over the past 20 years, the number of Black and Latino students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses throughout the country has risen, with Maryland and Texas boasting record numbers of students taking the AP examinations (College Board, 2012). However, even given the increase, the gap within the AP program continues to exist with minorities being outperformed, or out enrolled by Whites and Asians. This is critical information, as college completion is most likely when students enroll in academically intense, high quality coursework while in high school (Adelman, 1999). Adelman also found that a school district's curriculum is a strong predictor of postsecondary education completion, even more than class rank, grade point average, or test scores. His research showed that the combination of a student's background, coursework, class rank, and senior year test scores have a stronger relationship to bachelor's degree completion than socioeconomic status. Adelman (1999) and McDonough (2005) posit that high quality coursework provides students with the information and skills that higher education

institutions will expect of them prior to admittance. This includes Advanced Placement courses, as well as advanced mathematics courses, such as Algebra I, a gateway course taken during middle school and high school.

Many researchers (ACT Report, 2004; Adelman, 1999; Barton & Coley, 2009; Braddock, 1990; Gamoran, 1987; Oakes, 1987) attribute the achievement gap to several factors, including lack of access and low course rigor, and suggest that course rigor is the most powerful predictor of academic achievement, high school graduation, and enrollment in postsecondary education. Adelman (1999) determined that a strong academic program is significant for college enrollment among African American and Latino students, and college completion is most likely when students participate in academically intense and high-quality coursework during high school (Barton & Coley, 2009).

The predictors of college-going behavior, academic rigor, and strong social and academic support are the most critical predictors of a student's successful enrollment in, and completion of, postsecondary education (Stage & Rushin, 1993). And as this phenomenon relates to minority students, studies have shown the following to be the strongest predictors of college attendance and completion: academic preparation, social support, access to information, parental involvement, and knowledge about college. Conley (2005) suggests that schools increase students' chances of success by providing a context for social situations, networks, daily activities, and systems of support from teachers and peers. Thus, the predictors of college-going behavior can be embedded in high school reform efforts aimed at increasing student achievement, college preparedness, and success for marginalized students.

Problem Statement

At Ford High School, while 52% of the student body is Black, only 10% are enrolled in AP courses (State of the District, 2011), while the percentage of Black students enrolled in lower level classes is approximately 90%. The percentage of White students enrolled in level 2 classes is 7% and is slightly higher in level 3 classes at 9%. Therefore, this research examines school policies and student experiences that will help to explain the connection between the overrepresentation of Black students in low level classes and the underrepresentation of Black students in AP courses and makes recommendations for policy, practice, and additional study.

For students who aspire to attend college, the rigor of the courses that are offered in high school is the most powerful predictor of academic achievement, high school graduation, and enrollment in post secondary education (ACT, 2004; Adelman, 1999; Braddock, 1990; Gamoran, 1987; Oakes, 1987). Moreover, studies have demonstrated that students who enroll in rigorous academic programs in high school attend and persist in higher education at greater rates than students who enroll in less difficult programs of study (ACT, 2004; Adelman, 1999; Herold, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is twofold. My first goal is to understand why Black student enrollment is significantly lower in AP courses than the enrollment of their White peers. The second goal of the study is to learn about the experiences of the participants who are enrolled in AP courses, as well as those who, based upon the district matrix, are qualified to enroll, but have chosen not to. This study examines 1) the selection and

identification policies; 2) the barriers which lead to Black students' absence in this elite

program and 3) the implications for college readiness and persistence.

Research Questions

1. What can we learn from the experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in AP, and how can their experiences be used to encourage other minority high school students to participate?

2. What factors discourage and/or prevent qualified Black students from enrolling in the AP program?

3. How do students' relationships with parents and school personnel (administrators, teachers, counselors) and their connection to the school affect their desire to participate in the AP program?

4. In what ways do school and district practices contribute to the underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program?

5. What measures can school and district personnel take to increase access, equity, rates of enrollment, and success for Black students relative to the AP program?

6. How can Critical Race Theory provide insights into students' experiences that can assist with increasing Black student achievement?

This study is guided by Maxwell's (2005) perspective on intellectual, practical, and personal goals. My personal goal is to come to an understanding of why the enrollment of Black students in the advanced placement program is significantly lower than the enrollment of their White peers, especially given the fact that Black students are the dominant group at Ford High School, representing 52% of the student body. This is

accomplished by inviting the sample group to reflect upon their experiences as Black students in an integrated school.

This work is important, because, while a small percentage of Black students participate in the AP program, students must understand the implications around the decisions that they make about academic preparation, course enrollment, and college attendance. Variables are examined that contribute to this underrepresentation, such as: school structures and barriers, the learning environment, and students' perceptions about the costs and benefits of their success. Throughout the study, I integrate student perspectives and learn about their academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development.

The results of this research may be of particular interest to school districts with similar demographics to that of the research site, as the findings may offer useful suggestions and strategies for encouraging student participation and providing AP access to capable students while learning about their experiences as Black students. It also serves to add to the sparse research around this concern and offers suggestions as to ways school leaders might increase the enrollment of Black students and increase their chances of success in these courses.

Significance of the Study

After decades of low Black student representation in the AP program, the problem persists (College Board, 2010, 2012); however, information gleaned from this study may be useful in determining effective recruitment and retention strategies that can be employed by schools to increase the numbers of Black students in the AP program. Increasing Black presence in this program has become a priority of the College Board

(College Board, 2008, 2010, 2012), as well as a small number of school districts across the nation, but with relatively little change. However, educators who seek to increase the numbers and success rates of students entering and enrolling in AP courses should be a priority for school districts across the nation, given that research shows that participation and success in rigorous classes can significantly alter students' life chances. It is my belief that the findings from this study serve as a roadmap for not only how we must proceed as a district in our efforts to close the racial achievement gap, but how we ensure that students receive the type of support mechanisms necessary to be successful when they advance into high level courses.

At the close of the 2011-2012 school year, the Ford High School Restructuring Team established strategic goals in an effort to overhaul the high school program. One of the three key objectives highlighted in the five year plan was the following: "*Because enrollment in advanced placement classes correlates highly with success in postsecondary schooling, by 2016, [Ford] High school students will show improved academic achievement by increasing the proportion of Black students enrolled in advanced placement courses. The rate of participation of Black students will increase by 50% over a five year period.*" An important category of our five year strategic plan falls under *Driving Principles for Teaching and Learning.* Embedded in this category is: *rigorous instruction; challenging all students to high levels of academic excellence, and improving adult learning and instruction through professional development* (District Strategic Plan, 2011). By identifying the reasons for the low enrollment of Black students in advanced placement courses at Ford High school, schools with similar demographics can pay closer attention to their own practices that may inhibit eligible minority students

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from fully participating in the AP program. It is my hope that school and district leaders view this challenge as an issue of social justice and work deliberately to provide all students with opportunities to excel within their school environment. Positive school reform efforts can ultimately increase the numbers of students who are identified and are successful in the AP program.

Theoretical Framework

Using critical race theory (CRT) as a framework, this study examines the factors that lead to the underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program. Further, CRT is used to analyze students' responses regarding their decisions to enroll in, drop out of, and avoid AP courses altogether. The study highlights attitudes and beliefs about the school environment; the effects of structural practices; relationships with teachers, counselors, and administrators; and how and why they reach their decisions to enroll in rigorous courses. CRT has been used to explore the effects of racial injustice on the achievement of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and focuses on providing students and educators with strategies that enable them to normalize bias and racism, so that they are better able to address these issues from an informed perspective. Moreover, this framework illustrates how social constructs can factor into the schooling experiences of students of color.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Given the study's qualitative design, there are limitations to using this method of inquiry, as it may not be generalized on a larger scale. Over generalizations could be made based upon participants who do not necessarily reflect the larger groups of high achieving Black students. Additionally, when relying predominantly on students' self-

reporting about their experiences as Black students in a suburban high school, one must assume that there is a one sidedness to their reflections. Further, the small sample size does not allow for generalizations of any findings regarding other Black students. Lastly, the study was vulnerable to researcher bias as I was an administrator in the school at the time of the study; led the establishment of the Minority Achievement Committee (MAC) Scholars program; constructed the questions; determined the location of the participants in the sample; analyzed the data, and developed the findings, recommendations and conclusions.

Conclusion

College enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates are higher among students who are enrolled in college preparatory classes, such as those offered as part of the Advanced Placement program. However, due to various school policies, practices, and structures, AP participation has been limited for many Black students and other minorities. Given this reality, current school policies and practices may hinder the enrollment of some student subgroups. This issue was explored, with the expectation that the outcome would lead to the creation of a more inclusive AP program at Ford High School. Few Black students have broken through the structural color barrier in higher level courses; therefore, it is critical that the causes are explored. As such, this qualitative study investigates the key factors that lead to the low enrollment of Black students in the AP program and provides a narrative of students' experiences. Students who are currently enrolled in AP courses, as well as those students who according to school records qualify, but have not explored or enrolled in AP classes, are interviewed. It is important to note that the focus on Black students is aligned with our school district data which underscores

the educational attainment gaps that exist between Black and White students at Ford High School.

Organization of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the rationale for the study, the statement of the problem, the research questions, theoretical perspective related to the study, definition of terms and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature related to the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and talented educational programs. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in the study, including the description of the population and sample instrumentation, research design, reliability and validity, procedures, research questions, and approaches for analyzing the data. Chapter 4 provides a detailed presentation and analysis of the data. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the findings of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

An examination of the literature on the topic reveals 10 distinct areas of interest to researchers regarding the reasons for the underrepresentation of Black students in the advanced placement program: 1) the selection and identification process; 2) recognizing and constructing academic talent; 3) the middle years 4) social justice leaders; 5) teacher expectations; 6) the impact of guidance counselors; 7) the role of the parent; 8) cultural barriers; 9) competence of teachers; and 10) racial identity and achievement.

<center>**Chapter II**</center>

<center>**Review of the Literature**</center>

Introduction

Students who take more intense academic programs in high school persist in higher education at greater rates than students who take less difficult programs of study (ACT, 2004; Adelman, 1999; Fry, 2004; Herold, 2003). Several studies explore the reasons associated with the underrepresentation of minority students in AP courses and offer suggestions for how school leaders might increase the numbers of Black AP enrollees, their success in the courses, and retention.

The Advanced Placement Program (AP), a program of the College Board, introduces students to a college curriculum that permits them to earn college level credit while still in high school. This program is designed to boost students' skills for succeeding in college and bolster their confidence in their ability to succeed. An experience such as this is invaluable to any student planning to attend college, but is even more impactful to students without family experiences of college attendance, among students whose peer groups who do not consider education a promising option for the future, or in schools that do not emphasize college preparation. Ford High School consistently ranks highly in the biannual US News Best High School list (www.njmonthly.com/schools/highschoolrankings/top-high-schools-2010.com), which uses a variety of indicators to compare the effectiveness of 389 high schools in the state of New Jersey. Some of the indicators used are: percentage of students who graduate on time, college readiness index, mathematics and language arts proficiency scores, AP

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participation rate, and a student/teacher ratio. When the rankings were released in 2010, Ford High School scored in the top 20 percent; however, the 2012 rankings revealed that Ford's rank had increased significantly. One might easily assume, based upon the school's rank, that college preparation is widely encouraged. However, when the data reveal the academic gaps that exist within this context (achievement gap, course access gap, college preparedness gap and an expectations gap), it becomes clear that a school's ranking does not tell the entire story. Therefore, the achievement of White students compared with the achievement of Black students, overall, is somewhat perplexing.

Critical Race Theory informs this study and is used as the framework to understand and explain the low enrollment of Black students in the AP program. Scholars in this area theorize that the reason for the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs lies in the history of the United States, which has inevitably made its way into all levels of the American classroom (Saddler, 2005). According to Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993), there are six key themes that define this theory:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life:
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy;
3. Critical race theory challenges historicism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law…Critical race theorists…adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage;
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society;
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary;
6. Critical race theory works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

Critical theorists choose to have their research benefit those who are marginalized in society and argue that research that is anchored in critical theory should "empower the

powerless and transform existing societal inequalities and injustices" (McLaren, 1994, p. 168).

Closing the racial achievement gap by ensuring that all students are exposed to high levels of rigor is an ongoing conversation in the policy arena and central to the success of President Obama's 2020 goal. Closing this gap is daunting, because Black students, and students of color in general, have not been appropriately prepared for the AP program, and therefore are not fairly represented (McDonough, 2005). Thus, a greater emphasis should be placed on preparing students during the pre AP years (grades 6-10), according to Trevor Packer of the College Board (Adams, 2012). To address this concern, it is important to ascertain the factors that have led to the underrepresentation of these students, because for several decades, enrollment in this program was limited to students enrolled in suburban, predominantly White high schools where White and Asian students represented the primary participants.

The Selection and Identification Process

Beginning in 2010, district leaders made the decision to administer the PSAT to every 10th and 11th grade student, at no cost to parents, and elected to use these results in addition to standardized test scores, teacher recommendations, and students' grades in determining AP course placement. The results of the PSAT are used to identify students and boost the participation of those who are "missing" from the AP program. According to College Board, the College and Career Readiness Benchmarks help educators gauge college readiness and aid in understanding which students are on successful college/ career trajectories. Yet, despite including PSAT scores in the matrix of tools used to select students, there are students who are not enrolled in the AP program who perhaps

should be enrolled. Reid Saaris, Founder and Executive Director of Equal Opportunity

Schools (EOS), partners with schools around the country to ensure that deliberate efforts

are made to seek out these students who, based upon test scores, qualify to enroll in high

level courses. Saaris describes them as "missing students" who would probably be

successful in Advanced Placement classes if they were identified by school personnel and

provided with an opportunity to enroll (www.equalopportunityschools.org). Currently,

almost 90% of states rely on these standardized tests to identify students, with

multidimensional assessments being used with less frequency. Although many

researchers have touted the reliability of these methods, some scholars contend that these

types of tests are inappropriate for use with students from diverse cultural groups, due to

the continued disproportionate representation of Black students in gifted programming

(Ford & Harris, 1991; Harris & Ford, 1991; Ford & Moore, 2004; Moore et al., 2005a;

Patton, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Tuttle, Becker, & Sousa, 1998). The practice of

giving teachers autonomy over who gets in and who is left out of AP courses gives a

great deal of power to the gatekeepers who are positioned to permit students entry into

high level classes, such as AP, rather subjectively.

To that end, school districts should seek to increase the knowledge base and

cultural sensitivity of teachers who are charged with identifying students for classes such

as AP (Day-Vines et al., 2005; Patton & Day-Vines, 2005). At Ford High School, AP

teachers are the gatekeepers to the AP courses that they teach and, as such, have the

power and authority to perpetuate the low representation of Black students in these

courses. As it stands, with no Board of Education policy in place to standardize and

monitor the process of AP access and selection, the gate keeping policies persist.

According to Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, this is problematic, because if educators continue to limit AP access to the top 10% of students, this may send an unintentional message to the remaining 90% that they need not push themselves to excel. He further states that the experience alone of taking a rigorous course is beneficial, regardless of whether or not a passing score is achieved (Adams, 2012).

Students of color are often not expected to achieve to the level of their White counterparts (Cohen, 1992; Cohen & Lotan, 1995, 1997). Thus, to ensure that Black and Latino children, who are often assigned a lower status in heterogeneous classrooms, are judged fairly with respect to their participation, the effects of status differences in the classroom were studied with an emphasis on how children participated in class (Cohen, 1992; Cohen & Lotan, 1995, 1997). These studies led scholars to develop ways to change academic status differences in the classroom in such a way that children would be encouraged to use one another as a resource in cooperative learning groups (Gay, 2000). Slavin (1987, 1992, 1995) provides additional evidence of the pedagogical power of cooperative learning. It is critical that teachers are trained in multiculturalism and diverse learning styles if we are ever to see an increase in the number of Black students identified for services (Ford, 1995). As the research indicates, identification of high achieving students is often based upon a matrix that does not accurately identify the intelligence of students from backgrounds that differ from those who have the power to invite students into the program (Ford, 1998).

Several reasons can be attributed to the low numbers of Black students enrolled in high level courses: a lack of information on the part of the parent to effectively advocate

for their child, a lack of teacher knowledge regarding the differences in learning styles, and the ways in which giftedness can differ between Black and White students (Ford, 1995). It should not come as a surprise, then, that these differences in learning and ability have implications for the identification of student eligibility and teacher practices. Although theories abound about what constitutes innate ability, this is not addressed from a cultural standpoint (Ford 1995). Of those students who begin their schooling with the fundamental skills required to succeed in school, what percent fail to thrive due to a lack of cultural competence on the part of the teacher?

Recognizing and Constructing Academic Talent

Since the 1950s when gifted programs began to gain prominence, traditional methods have been used to identify academically talented students, with intelligence tests being the most common method. However, Jack Birch (1984) in his article titled "Is Any Identification Procedure Necessary?" questioned the legitimacy of the tests and suggests that "…we need to explore the broader context within which the child functions and which includes social, personal, and cultural factors which contribute much to the shaping of academic abilities, limitations, special interest and potentials" (Birch, 1984, p. 158). Today, however, more professionals recognize that children who are considered academically talented display a wide range of talents. Therefore, because of the diversity among students who are considered gifted, educators in the gifted arena have moved away from using high test scores to determine aptitude. Instead, broader conceptual models are used.

Early identification of academic talent is important to the development of gifts into talents, and is particularly important for children who come from economically

disadvantaged backgrounds. When provided with challenging learning activities that nurture their gifts, children perform at a much higher levels than children who are provided a skill-based curriculum that focuses on their weaknesses (Borland, Schnur, & Wright, 2000; Johnsen & Ryser, 1994). The problem, however, lies in the fact that teacher nominations of students are often based upon White middle class values and expectations: rigidity, conformity, orderliness, dependence, passivity, and acquiescence (Bonner, 2000). Conversely, non-conformity, untidiness, independence, activity, and assertiveness are often used to describe students who do not often qualify for advanced coursework (Savick, 2009). As a result, students' intellect is ignored by teachers who are unable or unwilling to look beyond atypical behaviors and focus on intellect. As such, teachers are more inclined to refer the "model" child for high level programs (Ford 1995), which affects eligibility for gifted programs, and eventually the Advanced Placement program, because the student who demonstrates the less desirable traits, may never be identified as gifted despite his or her intellect (Bonner, 2000).

The Middle School Years

School leaders bear an enormous responsibility to educate our youth and ensure that they are prepared for post secondary education. In 2001, nearly one third of college students in the United States were required to take remedial classes (www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu). The Forgotten Middle (ACT, 2008) suggests that there is a critical defining point for students in the college and career readiness process, (ACT, 2008) and contends that if students graduate from the eighth grade unprepared for high school, the impact on post secondary education and career choices may be irreversible. Thus, schools must be more vigilant and accountable for ensuring that students are

prepared for college and career by the end of eighth grade. What this suggests is that middle school educators are integral to increasing college graduation rates (United Way, 2008, p. 30), and it is critical that they expose students to age appropriate, rigorous coursework. Further, a transitional approach from middle school to high school is essential in preparing students for academic success, beginning with a firm comprehension of fourth grade literacy skills and continuing with a focus on strategic reading, expository writing, and algebra preparedness (ACT, 2008). In July 2012, ACT announced its development of a series of assessments, connected to the new common core standards, for students in grades 3-10 that would measure skills that students will need to master for college and careers. It is expected that these digitally administered tests will provide immediate feedback to teachers and students and were piloted in the fall of 2012 with a full launch in 2014. The test promises to build a connection from grade 3 through grade 10 by measuring students' growth as they advance from elementary through high school. Although the test is not academic in nature, it does provide a holistic picture of individual students, and enables teachers to assess and evaluate behavioral skills.

The goal of this assessment is to generate information about students' strengths and weaknesses beginning in the middle school years, so that teachers will be able to intervene early. It is likely that this intervention strategy will improve students' chances of success. Close to twenty percent of students who sat for the ACT examination in 2012 failed to meet any of the ACT college readiness benchmarks. This translated into a lack of preparedness in English Composition, College Algebra, Biology, and Social Science. The same report showed that only five percent of African Americans met all four

benchmarks, whereas, 42%, or four out of every 10 Asian student met the benchmarks in three of four subject areas. Overall, benchmarks were met by at least 50 percent of Asian and White students. Conversely, none of the benchmarks were met by at least 50 percent of African American, American Indian, or Hispanic students. (www.act.org/research-policy/college-career-readiness-report-2012.org)

Social Justice Leaders

In an ideal world, social justice and leadership intersect to address the inequities faced by marginalized students. Theoharis (2007) suggests that one way to eliminate the dysfunction that exists in schools is through leaders who champion social justice. The achievement gap continues to serve as evidence that too many minority students are being left behind, and the fact that certain groups of students continue to face overt and subtle aggressions in schools poses a serious question about why school leaders are unable to rectify this issue. It is incumbent upon school leaders to acquire the skills necessary to lead this challenge and to subsequently ensure that all students are provided with opportunities to increase their life chances as they journey through school. Moreover, school leaders work to ensure that inequitable practices and school barriers that too often prevent students from accessing those programs are identified and dismantled. The work of the social justice leader must persist in order to remedy the problems associated with the gap once and for all.

Teacher Expectations

Teachers play a critical role in student achievement, with teacher quality greatly impacting student performance. Moreover, scholars suggest that when Black students are in classrooms with teachers who have high expectations, the likelihood of their academic

success increases (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Studies also found when positive relationships are established and sustained between teachers and their students, and when students feel that their teachers care about them, student performance is enhanced (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ferguson 2005; Gay 2000; Grant, 1985; Ladson Billings, 2004; Marzano 2001). For this reason, teachers have to care so much about ethnically diverse students and their achievement that they accept nothing less than high-level success from them and work diligently to accomplish it (Foster, 1997). Scholars also contend that students respond more favorably to teachers who have strong pedagogical skills. These teachers tend to incorporate strategies such as cooperative learning and culturally responsive teaching, which have been shown to raise the performance outcomes of culturally diverse students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Forty years ago, the issue of how teachers affect student performance was a topic of debate (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). What was discovered was that students who were assigned to teachers who believed in their ability to succeed saw higher academic outcomes than students whose teachers had lower expectations. More recently, Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) found that teacher expectations changed based upon the ethnic backgrounds of their students and determined that White students were favored over Black and Latino students. Their study concluded that the academic performance and limited access of these two groups could be impacted by the expectations held by their White teachers.

The Impact of Guidance Counselors

In the late 1970s, a new service approach to guidance was established, and school counselors were directed to anchor their guidance programs around clear goals and

objectives. It was at this time that K-12 counseling programs became more systematic

and moved away from the vocational guidance model (American School Counselor

Association, 2003). However, even with the systems approach and the push toward

building and sustaining a college going culture, a gap exists in K-12 academic

preparation and college participation between White students and African American and

Latino high school graduates (McDonough, 2003). Reasons for this are a lack of

knowledge on the part of students and parents of color; regarding college from a narrow,

specific perspective; and a lack of trained counseling professionals assigned to advise

these students and their parents (McDonough, 2003). Students of color, McDonough

states, when compared to their White counterparts, are the least likely to obtain this

information by the eighth grade. Consequently they fail to enroll in college preparatory

classes in high school, and the academic damage that results is often irreparable.

To address this problem, the College Board (2010) has established eight

components of College and Career Readiness Counseling to implement across grade

levels beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school. It is expected

that this system of accountability will ensure equity in both process and results

(www.advocacy.collegeboard.org). The eight components below are found in elementary,

middle, and high school counseling programs.

- College Aspirations
- Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness
- Enrichment and Extra Curricular Engagement
- College and Career Exploration and Selection Process
- College and Career Assessments
- College Affordability Planning

- The College and Career Admission Processes and
- Transitions from High School to College Enrollment

The last two components are more specific to the needs of high school students. Additionally, the College Board underscores the importance of context, cultural competence, multilevel interventions, and the analysis of student data, and it has been determined that guidance counselors lack knowledge about college programs, such as the Equal Opportunity Program, a need based financial aid program, as well as other avenues available to minority students that can help to defray college costs. The result is that many parents of color do not consider college as a viable option for their children, convinced that it is financially unattainable. Knowledge of these programs can make a difference in college preparation and enrollment. Conversely, upper middle class parents are more knowledgeable about college admissions requirements and the availability of scholarships and financial aid, and are more likely to procure private college counselors, thereby providing their children with head start on the college track (McDonough, 2005).

Arguably, the guidance department is the central hub and the heartbeat of high schools, and the place where critical decisions are made regarding students' post secondary choices and decisions (McDonough, 2005). As the people who are hired to promote academic achievement, school counselors play a central role in the academic achievement of students and are charged with the responsibility of guiding the academic decisions of their students. Bangster (2008) argues that school counselors should be held accountable for the college enrollment of their assigned students. It is the proactive leadership of these counseling professionals that should bring together all stakeholders in the delivery of programs and services to ensure that students achieve success in high

school. To carry out their work effectively, they must be aware of the institutional

barriers such as discrimination, racism, and oppression that may affect academic

attainment and must be trained in multiculturalism in order to work effectively with

gifted Black students (Ford & Grantham 2003). Bradley, Johnson, Rawls and Dodson-

Sims (2012), expand this concept by asserting that school counselors must be educated in

multiculturalism so that they have the capacity to meet the educational and

developmental needs of all of their assigned counselees, whether or not they are

identified as academically talented. Ford and Grantham (2003) further explain, that in an

effort to build a level of trust and understanding with racially and culturally diverse

students, counselors must have a clear understanding of the self-perceptions of students

who fall within these groups, specifically around racial identity and self concept. Further,

they must serve as social justice advocates for marginalized groups and act as agents of

change within their context (ASCA, 2005; Cook, Hayden, & Wilczenski, 2011). With

this in mind, "School counselors must be intentional in maintaining a comprehensive

perspective of African American families." (Bradley et al., 2012, p. 425). The reality,

however, is that few schools mandate that counselors participate in professional

development, for any reason (Johnson, Ott, Rochkind, & Dupont 2010). As such, it is

unrealistic to expect that counselors will voluntarily extend their knowledge relative to

specific student subgroups. Consequently, the notion of fostering a college going

environment that is inclusive of all students, is just that, a notion.

The Role of the Parent

Parents who assume an active role in helping their children navigate a complex

high school system are more likely to have children who feel comfortable within the

environment and move through school with few issues (Ndura, Robinson & Ochs, 2003). Additionally, Black students whose parents are highly educated, with higher income levels, are more successful in school than students from lower socioeconomic status families (Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Ndura et al., 2003). Ultimately, parental involvement and advocacy, regardless of their financial status, is critical to student success in school (Floyd, 1996; Jeynes, 2007). Although there is a lack of research around how Black parents positively support their children, the majority of existing studies do not focus on Black parents who understand, promote, and expect their children to fare well academically. What we do know, however, is that the parents of successful students are more likely to engage their children in conversations about school and extra curricula activities (Yan, 1999), and for Black males, in particular, there is a direct correlation between parents' expectations and their level of involvement in their children's academic lives (Toldson, 2008; Trusty, 2002). McDonough (2005) found that consistent communication among students, parents, and school personnel increased enrollment in college programs and contends that school counseling programs are responsible for a lack of understanding on the part of parents of color.

Cultural Barriers

Many teachers are ill prepared to address the cultural and academic needs of students whose cultures differ from their own. This lack of understanding causes teachers to view their students from a deficit perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Cultural deficit theory is similar to Ford's (1995) deficit thinking, but places an emphasis on the cultural misunderstanding that has been perpetuated by the teacher. Cultural Deficit Theory suggests that the cultural values of Black students and their families are deficient and

dysfunctional (Soloranzo & Yosso, 2001). These so called deficient values can include:

present versus future temporal orientation, immediate versus delayed gratification, and

collaboration versus competition (Carter & Segura, 1979). Persons who subscribe to this

model believe that parents who fail to relinquish their own cultural values, rather than

embracing those of the dominant culture, are responsible for their children's poor

educational outcomes (Solorzano & Yasso, 2001). Flores, Cousin, and Diaz (1991, p.

371) state that, "Blaming the children's parent, the culture, and their language for their

lack of success has been a classic strategy used to subordinate and continue to fault the

'victim.'" Thus, one might conclude that many educators, who do not share or understand

their students' cultural backgrounds, assume that the cultural values passed down to

students from their families can impact students negatively and impede their academic

success.

Cultural Competence of the Teacher

Although American schools are becoming more diverse, European culture

dominates our schools. This is evident in curricula, in standardized tests, in school

traditions, and in the way teachers disseminate information in the classroom. Culturally

relevant teaching is a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially,

emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and

attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as

using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse

students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and

through the strengths of these students. Gay (2002) also describes culturally responsive

teaching as having these characteristics:

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1. It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.
2. It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.
3. It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.
4. It teaches students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages.
5. It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools. (p. 29)

Culturally relevant lessons connect content to students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. As such, it is believed that in order for students to "buy into" education, they must be able to make personal connections with the learning process. Teachers can facilitate this by including in the curriculum literature by authors who share the same culture as the readers and who write about cultural experiences to which students are able to relate. "When a child perceives a writing task or a text …as belonging to and reaffirming his or her cultural identity, it is more likely that he or she will become engaged and individual meaning will be transmitted or derived" (Ferdman, 1990, p. 195).

Although research centered on culturally responsive pedagogy is not new, there has been a recent resurgence of studies indicating that culturally responsive teaching, coupled with high expectations, lead to higher levels of student motivation, engagement, and achievement. As such, a culturally responsive approach to teaching has been shown to be effective in motivating African American high school students to increase their learning outcomes in school (Gay, 2002).

Cooperation is central to the learning styles of people of color, and educators should be aware that in addition to cooperation, collaboration and community are

prominent themes, techniques, and goals in educating Latino, Native American, African American, African, and Asian American students (Gay, 2000). These groups tend to value human connectedness in a way that is not often observed in European cultures. Culturally responsive teachers who hold high expectations for students (a) are socioculturally conscious, (b) have affirming views of students from diverse backgrounds, (c) see themselves as responsible for and capable of bringing about change to make schools more equitable, (d) understand how learners construct knowledge and are capable of promoting knowledge construction, (e) know about the lives of their students, and (f) design instruction that builds on what their students already know while stretching them beyond the familiar (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

Ladson-Billings (1994) outlines the benefits of integrating culturally relevant pedagogy:

- Safe learning environment

- Meaningful and relevant learning experiences

- Identity and sense of self are validated

- Respect for self cultivates respect for others

- Decreased off task behaviors

- Increased motivation

Ladson-Billings (1990) and Au and Kawakami (1994) contend that their research and experiences concluded that only when teachers understand the cultural and historical background of students can they comprehend and react positively to minority students while enhancing their academic achievement. According to Banks (1997, p. 28), "Students are more likely to master these skills when the teacher uses content that deals

with significant human history and cultural events, the history and contemporary contributions of their ethnic group." Students are more likely to retain and apply information learned when they are able to relate the content to their lived experiences. Similarly, Carter G. Woodson determined through his research conducted during the early part of the 20th century (which became his heralded book *The Miseducation of the Negro)* that the failure to teach Black men about their history would result in people who would eventually be left with no history. "When a group or ethnic group fails to teach their history and culture, sooner or later, that history and culture will be forgotten and the group or ethnic group will be rendered nameless and faceless" (Woodson, 1933, p. 27). Scholars argue that little can be done within the existing establishment, or school system, to ensure that students' cultures are accepted and integrated into existing curriculum. As a result, schools that service only Black males have been growing in numbers across the country. "These academies provide an African centered curriculum that addresses the unique needs of urban juvenile and adolescent African American males and attempts to buffer them from potential pitfalls. Although this strategy has proven controversial, several Afrocentric all male academies have been created during the past decade, beginning in the Milwaukee school district and spreading to other districts throughout the nation" (Cooper & Jordan, 2003, p. 384).

According to some studies, teachers need not be insiders in a particular culture in order to engage effectively in culturally responsive instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1994); educators can learn about a culture, respect its values, and view differences in students' diverse learning needs through cultural competency training. Teachers often question the practicality of culturally responsive teaching and request specific tools or pedagogical

instructions. However, it is important that those leading the efforts push teachers to be

reflective and examine how their own social positioning impacts student learning.

Culturally responsive teaching is identical to critical thinking in that it is a critical,

pedagogical building block and encourages educators to continually assess the larger

dynamics which rise to the surface in our teaching in ways that allow us to successfully

reach Black students (Gay, 2000). Engaging in culturally responsive instruction is an

important approach in one's attempt to reach minority students.

Racial Identity and Achievement

It has been found that Black students leave their home culture and enter a school

culture that differs quite significantly from the one to which they are accustomed. For

White students, the school culture and home culture remain the same, so there is no

pressure to navigate between two worlds (Carter, 2010). This negotiation, strongly

connected to one's racial identity, can leave students feeling torn between how well they

perform academically versus acceptance from their peers, resulting in low academic

achievement and poor self concept and ultimately their absence from high level classes.

Ford and Grantham (2003) examined the role that racial identity plays in the

academic achievement of high achieving Black students and suggested that until

educators place greater emphasis and effort on this topic, they will continue to be

unsuccessful in addressing the needs of students who need them the most. Ford explained

that because relatively few Black families have formal training in self concept and

identity theories, they may be ill-equipped to address their children's needs in these areas.

However, this could be remedied if more guidance counselors were trained in

multiculturalism and cultural sensitivity, as bridging this gap would facilitate their work

with families. This speaks to the importance of increased training in this area and the

hiring of guidance counselors who possess the targeted skills necessary to work

effectively with culturally diverse students and their parents.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Fryer (2006) found that students often view one's

striving for academic success as acting White (Fryer, 2006), a theory that is more

prevalent in schools where Blacks are the majority (more than 80%), but can also present

itself in schools in which Blacks are the minority. Students who attend schools in more

diverse settings, however, are more likely to be shunned by peers for selling out or acting

White. According to Ogbu (2003), this peer dynamic begins in middle school and

continues through high school. It is interpreted by high achieving Black students as social

isolation from their White peers and rejection by their Black peers. Further, when Black

high achieving students excelled in school, they were seen by their Black peers as

rejecting their racial identity (Ogbu 2003; Tatum, 1997b). The rejection places students in

a position which compels them to choose between academics and social acceptance.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of literature that pertains to the academic and racial

achievement gap that exists in schools across the United States, yet minimal gains have

been made with regard to closing these gaps. Further, while those in the educational arena

are familiar with the gap that exists between struggling students and their high achieving

peers, little is mentioned with regard to the relatively small number of high achieving

Black students and their experiences in Advanced Placement classes. Even less is known

about high achieving students who have chosen not to enroll in the AP program, and how

they arrive at their decisions not to participate. Some theorists point to the inner workings

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of schools and how school structures and barriers contribute to the gap. Others look at those on the front lines: teachers, guidance counselors, principals, district leaders, and others who influence Black student participation. There are also scholars who suggest that the low enrollment of Black students in AP courses can be traced back to segregation and race relations in the United States.

Wherever the truth lies, what is known is that within the walls of Ford High School there exists a small number of students who have carved out an AP trajectory for themselves and are on a path of success and greatness. There are also students who have great potential, by most accounts, but have elected to follow the less rigorous road. This study serves as a stage for these students, on which their voices are heard and their stories are told. It also adds to the literature and fills a research gap.

Chapter III

Methodology

Research Methods, Purpose, and Rationale

This research was initially motivated by data collected from my school district regarding the low performance rates of Black students in general, but more specifically, the low numbers of Black students enrolled in AP courses. As such, my curiosity led me to explore the factors (including school and district policies and structures) that contribute to the low enrollment of Black students in the AP program. As part of the study, I have provided a narrative description of the experiences of these AP students, as well as students who, for a variety of reasons, chose not to participate in these courses.

The design selected for this study was that of a qualitative study using extreme case sampling, which is used to identify a subgroup within a culture and focuses on cases that are rich in information and unusual or special in some way (Patton, 2002). The methodological approach of this study was the case study; this approach enabled me to conduct an in depth study of each of the selected participants (Yin, 2009). Case studies are centered on empirical inquiry and are often used to represent rare or unique events; therefore, it is appropriate to use this design when one needs to understand a problem or situation in great depth (Yin, 2009) and allows greater exploration of the subjects' experiences (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). This type of investigation provided me with an understanding of patterns and differences in the school experiences of these students.

One of the most important sources of information when using the case study design is the interview (Yin, 2009) with the case study method being the preferred strategy when *how* or *why* questions are being asked. This approach was beneficial, as I was curious to learn how the participants viewed themselves as learners; what they perceived as their learning assets; and how they were able to continue along this trajectory despite the hundreds of Black students at this high school who struggle academically every day. My objective was to determine how they felt about the choices that they had made both to enroll in AP courses, as well as their decisions not to. Yin (2009) cites six types of data that are typically collected for case study research. They include: documents (letters, progress reports); archival records; interviews (typically open ended, focused); direct observations (formal or casual); participant observation and physical artifacts. He also notes six steps involved in case study research: 1. Determine and define the question; 2. Select cases and determine gathering and analysis techniques; 3. Prepare to collect data; 4. Collect data; 5. Evaluate and analyze data; 6. Prepare the report.

The Local Context

Ford High School, a pseudonym, is located in a school district that is comprised of two towns. In 1993, the United States Department of Education cited Ford High School as a *Blue Ribbon School of Excellence*. In addition to the high school, there are six elementary schools and two middle schools, with a total enrollment of approximately 1900 students. The student body is culturally and racially diverse. Fifty two percent of the students are Black. Forty percent of the students are White, with Asians and Latinos comprising the last 8%. A number of staff members have worked at the high school for

more than 25 years, and approximately 10% of the teaching staff have doctoral or law degrees. The faculty makeup is 85% White, 13% Black/African American, .038% Hispanic, .011% East Indian, and .005% Middle Eastern. Our principal is an African American woman with a doctoral degree from an Ivy League university.

The district factor grouping, or DFG, for our school district is I. This classification system was created by the New Jersey State Department of Education to compare students' performance on statewide assessments. It indicates the socioeconomic status of residents in each district and is used for comparative reporting of test results from New Jersey's statewide testing programs. Developed in 1974, the DFG uses demographic variables from the 1970 U. S. Census. In 1984 it was revised to account for the 1980 U. S. Census and again updated in 1992 to reflect data from the 1990 U. S. Census.

The DFG uses the following demographic variables: (a) percent of adult residents who did not complete high school, (b) percent of adult residents who attended college, (c) occupational status of adult household members [11 categories ranging from laborers to professionals], (d) population density, or persons per square mile, (f) median family income, (g) percent of those in the work force who received some unemployment compensation, and (h) percent of residents below the poverty level. Eight DFGs were created based on the 1990 United States Census data. They range from A (lowest socioeconomic districts) to J (highest socioeconomic districts) and are labeled A, B, CD, DE, FG, GH, I, J. Updating the DFGs has not changed any district's designation as Special Needs or not Special Needs (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2010).

The M.A.C. Scholars Program

The M.A.C. Scholars (Minority Achievement Committee) mentoring program was established at Ford High School in February of 2012 and falls under the auspices of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). MSAN, our umbrella organization, was formed in 1999 by school superintendents from around the United States who sought to collaborate with other district leaders who were seeking to close racial achievement gaps within their contexts. As such, all MSAN school districts share similar demographics and seek to address racial differences in achievement while focusing on achievement gap challenges. Approximately 25 school districts are currently engaged, to varying degrees, in this network.

In 2011, four Ford High students were selected to attend the annual MSAN student conference in Columbia, Missouri. Over 300 student leaders from around the country were in attendance. There, Ford students were introduced to the M.A.C. Scholars program by the original Shaker Heights High School (Ohio) M.A.C. Scholars who conducted a presentation for all attendees that showcased their M.A.C. program. Our students were so intrigued by the presentation that following the large group presentation, they elected to attend a small group session that outlined how to replicate the M.A.C. Scholars program. The students expressed to us that what drew them to the program was that it was geared specifically toward closing the academic and racial achievement gap, which, according to scholars as well as data retrieved from participating schools across the country, is an effective way to advance student learning outcomes. For our Ford students, this type of program was long overdue.

Once we returned to New Jersey and shared the program with our principal and faculty, a small group of teachers volunteered to help build the program. Together, we believed that M.A.C. Scholars had the potential to play a significant role in the academic success of their peers. Our belief was based upon our personal experiences with mentoring programs, as well as the research that we had conducted around mentoring. Fries-Britt (1997) posits that mentoring and support programs can play an important role in ensuring that Black students are informed of the importance of enrolling in high level courses and remaining on a positive trajectory with the necessary supports in place. Moreover, programs such as this one can assist students in successfully navigating the demands placed upon them as high achieving students (Fries-Britt, 1999).

The program is made up of two student groups that fall under the umbrella of the M.A.C. program: the M.A.C. Scholars, who are high achieving juniors and seniors enrolled in Honors and AP courses, and the Rising Scholars, who are freshmen and sophomores enrolled in levels two through Honors courses. Forty M.A.C. Scholars have been assigned to mentor 100 Rising Scholars (most have two-three mentees). Almost 100 Rising Scholars were selected for potential and promise. These students will work with already high achieving upperclassman, the M.A.C. Scholars, to enhance their academic achievement, build character, and increase self efficacy, self-confidence, and their sense of community. The program also aims to foster peer support, which we expect will assist students beyond high school.

Under the guidance of faculty and administrators, M.A.C. Scholars support the Rising Scholars in a variety of ways. They plan and lead monthly group meetings and meet with their mentees informally to provide support. M.A.C. Scholars and Rising

Scholars meetings are held twice a month, during which time they discuss topics

designed to increase academic outcomes and address adolescent social issues and

identity formation within the American social construct. The Rising Scholars group

is comprised of three cohorts. The first cohort includes students who are enrolled

primarily in Honors level courses. The second cohort consists of students whose

academic records indicate that they are on the cusp of excelling and are enrolled in

primarily level three courses. The third cohort consists of students who, based upon their

records (GPA, transcripts, report cards and progress reports) are academically "at risk"

and are enrolled in level two courses. For the purpose of this study, I focus on M.A.C.

Scholars who are enrolled in AP courses and M.A.C Scholars who are enrolled only in

Honors courses.

There are several beliefs attached to the M.A.C. Scholars program – the first

two are critical for our students: the belief that adults hold our students in high regard,

and with that, have high expectations for their success. The second is the ideology that

being smart is cool - tenets that we believe will change the trajectory of children's

lives. The goal is to inspire academic excellence and leadership among Black students

and to cultivate independent learners, critical thinkers, problem solvers, collaborative

workers, and responsible contributors to society. The shared efforts of teachers, parents,

and students affiliated with our committee will help prepare rising scholars for roles in

a rapidly changing and diverse global community. Given the data compiled by the

school district that cite gaps in student outcomes between Black students and their

White peers, the M.A.C. Scholars program is our effort to address this dynamic.

Each year, our objectives for Rising Scholars include a demonstrated decrease

in discipline referrals, improvement in class/school attendance, and improvement in

performance outcomes indicated by a minimum of a 10 point grade increase in all subject

areas. Our ultimate goal is that every year, a substantial percentage of Rising Scholars

will be candidates for level changes, and these students will move up into Honors and AP

courses.

Given that we do not live in a post racial America, and can assume that racism

does exist in the daily lives of many racial minorities, it is almost expected that the

schools and classrooms that harbor racial achievement gaps are not devoid of racial

prejudice and discrimination (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Matsuda, Lawrence,

Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). It is probable, then, that students will encounter race issues

within the classroom setting. The point of this study is to give students a voice and a

place in which to make sense of those encounters. Our racial positions shape how we

listen to, perceive, and interpret stories. As such, it is important to provide a way for

students to tell their stories from their perspectives (Bell & Roberts, 2010). Therefore,

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the framework that is used to examine and interpret

students' responses to the research questions.

The CRT theory posits that race, and the meanings that we attach to race, are

socially constructed and are embedded in our everyday lives (Ladson-Billings, 1998;

Matsuda et al., 1993). For students, this includes educational settings. There are several

tenets that fall under the CRT umbrella; one of those tenets is counter-storytelling.

Counter storytelling is used as a method of telling stories by those whose voices have not

been heard (Love, 2004) and is used to challenge stories that have been told about those

who are marginalized by those in the dominant society. This method enabled me to come

to a better understanding of the role that race and racism play in society and in the classrooms at Ford High School. Counter-stories "are grounded in real life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002b, p. 36). Thus, it can serve as a way of "exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002b, p. 32).

Counter-story telling can expose assumptions made by the majority about minorities, and make those assumptions more visible and explicit (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000b). They also provide a vehicle for the discourse to move beyond the broad label of racism to reveal specific experiences that limit and reduce access and opportunities. Having the freedom to tell their own stories provides people of color with a greater sense of their own power and serves as a way to rectify the damage caused by majoritarian stories that blame people who are targeted by racism for their own subordination. By listening to the counter-stories of people of color, White people can gain access to a view of the world denied to them by White privilege and White domination (Horsman, 1981).

To direct the purpose of this qualitative study, the following research questions are explored:

1. What can we learn from the experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in AP, and how can their experiences be used to encourage other minority high school students to participate?

2. What factors discourage and/or prevent qualified Black students from enrolling in the AP program?

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3. How do students' relationships with parents and school personnel (administrators, teachers, counselors) and their connection to the school affect their desire to participate in the AP program?

4. In what ways do school and district practices contribute to the underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program?

5. What measures can school and district personnel take to increase access, equity, rates of enrollment, and success for Black students relative to the AP program?

6. How can Critical Race Theory provide insights into students' experiences that can assist with increasing Black student achievement?

Data Collection Procedures

An exploratory, semi-structured approach to gathering data for this study (Maxwell, 2005) was employed using two stages of data collection. This included focus groups with all participants followed by individual interviews with each participant. I began with focus group interviews, which encouraged conversations among students related to their academic and social experiences. This method aided in increasing their level of comfort with the interview format, which was a new experience for many of the selected students. I then followed with individual interviews. My students felt more comfortable in this setting having already participated in the group interviews, and, consequently, our discussions were more relaxed and extended the focus group conversations.

The data that were collected included memorandums, transcripts, and field notes from focus group sessions, one on one interviews, student academic transcripts, progress

reports, and report cards. In-depth interviews, in narrative format, provided me with greater insight about each of the participants, and the information gleaned was examined to identify patterns and general themes from the participants' experiences (Patton, 2002). Special attention was paid to repetition of the participants' thoughts and beliefs (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Patton (2002) also suggests that one pay attention to similarity in the words and phrases expressed by the interviewees, as well as experiences which may be similar, as this helps to distill commonalities in their experiences and enables the researcher to arrive at conclusions based on the data. In addition, it was important to be mindful that there was the potential for students to omit information, either inadvertently or purposefully; therefore, throughout the interviews, I repeatedly asked myself about information that I did not have (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

A series of open ended questions were generated and used to guide the interviews. The use of a guide, or protocol, provides structure when interviewing several people and focuses in on the issues to be explored (Patton, 2002). Thus, protocols were utilized for the focus groups and one on one interviews (Appendices B to E respectively). Questions were generated based upon literature that I had reviewed, as well as previous informal conversations that had taken place between the participants and myself. As the assistant principal responsible for all tenth and eleventh grade students, and as the M.A.C. coordinator, I have developed close relationships with the M.A.C. participants. Prior to the establishment of the program, I knew just a few of the students who would become M.A.C.s (as we affectionately refer to them). At this juncture, however, our relationships are quite familial, and we spend a lot of time talking informally about their school

experiences, families, and post high school plans. As a result, relationships that we have built benefitted me during the interview phase of the study.

It was presumed that topics around issues such as culture and race and how students saw themselves fitting into one or the other or both (as it related to their schooling experiences), or questions that focused on teacher/student relationships, would be avoided by students due to the sensitive nature of the questions. In order to obtain a complete picture of experiences, these areas were addressed. Interviews were semi structured, which afforded me with the flexibility to modify and rephrase questions based upon the direction of the interviews without compromising the data collection process. They were also audio taped (Yin, 2009), transcribed and analyzed for themes. Sessions lasted between 45-60 minutes.

Data were triangulated (interviews, focus groups, report cards, test scores) and examined for internal consistencies (Yin, 2009). This ensured that all of the sources supported one another and produced information that could be utilized for comparative and thematic analysis (Boyzatsis, 1998). Qualitative researchers must be mindful of these factors because they are beneficial when analyzing the results and judging the quality of the study (Patton, 2002). The use of these multiple methods of data collection provided me with a way to answer my research questions about the experiences of Black students and were a means for me to analyze the impact of their experiences on their academic achievement. Ongoing member checking was conducted (Maxwell, 2005) to increase the validity and credibility of my study and to verify my findings. This ensured that the information that had been captured and cross referenced was valid (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Participants

Constructing a clear understanding about the educational experiences of students was critical to the outcome of this study, and so the gathering and analysis of substantive information was essential. Denzin (1989) describes information about people's lived experiences, events, or situations, as thick, because attention is given to rich detail, meaningful social and historical contexts and experiences, and the significance of emotional context, all of which will help to enhance the depth and breadth of the study.

The target population was purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) from the M.A.C. Scholars program. Participants received a cover letter from me and a consent form for their parents to sign outlining the study and the participants' rights (Appendices F and G). The study was approved by the district (Appendix H) and by Rowan University's IRB. Students were selected based upon willingness, experience, and the extent to which they were able to provide meaningful and useful information (Patton, 2002). Permission from their parent or legal guardian was required to participate. The study focused on seniors primarily and one junior, as they have had more high school experiences and were able to provide richer, more mature, and more insightful data.

The sample included 12 Black students: 7 M.A.C. Scholars who were enrolled in at least one AP course and had a G.P.A. of at least a 3.0 (80%) and 5 M.A.C Scholars, enrolled in Honors, but not AP courses. Their school records indicated that they had the aptitude to gain access to AP courses, but had chosen not to enroll. These students were also selected based upon a 3.0 G.P.A. (80%). Discipline records indicating suspensions, detentions, etc. were reviewed, but this was not a concern for any of the selected students.

Although all of the students who participated in the study shared the same race, they came from different ethnic backgrounds. A number of our students' parents (and in some instances, our students) were born outside of the United States and were from countries such as: Haiti, Jamaica, and Nigeria.

Narrative Inquiry

Merriam (1998) explains how narrative inquiry is used to describe people's stories. Given the nature of this topic, narrative inquiry was decidedly the best approach to learn more about and ultimately document the experiences of Black students enrolled in the Advanced Placement program for several reasons. First, there is little research in the field that can accurately document these students' experiences, so it was important that their authentic voices and counter stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) were captured during the interviews. Thus, counter story telling was used as an avenue to open up dialogue with Black students at Ford High. Secondly, the narrative approach allowed me to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of this group of students and provided me with the flexibility with which to hear their stories. The open format setting served as a way to encourage participants to expound upon relevant, pivotal moments that occurred during their time at Ford High School. Moreover, this format encouraged reflection on past experiences and encouraged participants to give some thought to ideas that they had not previously considered.

Although interview protocols were prepared and were used to guide each session, the interview questions caused them to recall events and expound upon events and situations which had occurred in their lives; this led them to share personal stories about their families, friends, and school. I believe that the established relationships that I had

with all of the MACs provided a level of comfort for students. This resulted in a setting

that was relaxed and conducive to the broad experiences stories that students shared.

According to Andrews, Squire, and Tambokou (2008), people come to understand their

lives and the world around them through the telling of stories. As such, their narratives

also helped me gain a deeper understanding of their lives and the connections that existed

between their relationships with family, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, and their

school experiences. Students' storytelling enabled me to construct a holistic picture of

each of them as students, children, sisters, brothers, workers, athletes, and friends beyond

the walls of Ford High School. Further, their narratives provided stories that were counter

to those which have been told about them (Krumer-Nevo, 2004) and gave insight into all

of their experiences.

Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative research begins with the identification of themes that

emerge from one's data (Patton, 2002), and is a dynamic process that occurs during the

data collection phase of a study (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The process for analyzing

the data collected for this study included transcribing the notes and audio recordings of

the interviews. Once the data were collected, they were categorized and coded, which

increased manageability and created a framework for the analysis which followed. This

analysis was accomplished by looking for patterns and themes in the transcriptions.

Words, phrases, events and other commonalities among the participants were grouped

into categories known as open codes. Axial coding, which enabled me to both describe

and understand the new information followed the analysis, and next came the emergence

of themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A final step of the data analysis process included

member checking and a review of the data to check for reliability, triangulation, and

validity (Glesne, 1999).

Chapter IV

Analysis of the Data

Introduction

Chapter 4 focuses on the school experiences of 12 MAC Scholars. Seven of these students have elected to enroll in AP courses, while five have chosen not to participate in AP. Their stories provided me with insight pertaining to their achievement, school experiences, and how they view themselves as learners. The purpose of the study was to develop a clear understanding of how their experiences could be used to influence change within our school context by increasing the enrollment of Black students in the AP program.

This chapter first provides a brief description of each student and then discusses the major themes that emerged based upon the participants' responses to questions posed during the one on one interviews and focus groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The responses from the 12 students were analyzed within and across interview questions to detect themes and patterns. Themes were identified (Patton, 2002) within both groups by their frequent and consistent presence throughout the interviews by both groups. It is noteworthy that although themes were common to both the AP and the non AP group, themes also emerged that were unique to each set of participants. Themes unique to the AP group were: discomfort and isolation in AP courses and teacher expectations. The theme that emerged from the non AP student interviews was comfort in honors. Themes common to both groups are delineated as follows: lack of AP information, the impact of guidance counselors, the MAC Community, parental support, and self efficacy. Additionally, there were two themes that emerged based on gender. The first, for the

male AP students, was identity, and the second for the female students was the importance of community in the learning environment.

It should be noted that, in some instances, the questions did not receive a response from every student, as some students were more vocal than others in the focus group interviews. However, the individual interviews gave each student an opportunity to respond to all of the questions. The first set of descriptions in this chapter is of students who are enrolled in AP courses. The second set of descriptions is of students who qualify to enroll in at least one AP course based upon grades, but have elected not to enroll.

Study Participants

Advanced Placement participants.

Monica, a senior, is a member of the school choir, has a part time job, is the cross-country team manager and is a member of the Ford High School a capella group. She has two older siblings who are both currently enrolled in college - one as an undergraduate the other is enrolled in graduate school. Both parents are college educated, but fled from Haiti when she was a baby to escape political violence and to seek a better life for their family. Her father works as a truck driver, and her mother is a nurse. Monica is a loquacious, outgoing young lady and has taken three AP courses. She aspires to obtain a Ph.D. in psychology.

Juliet was born in Nigeria. Her father is a Nigerian diplomat and, as such, has afforded Juliet and her family many opportunities to travel the world. She has five older brothers, all of whom are currently enrolled in college. She is the captain of her lacrosse team, and is employed part time with a local tutoring company. She is also a member of

the Key club and the Teen Dating Abuse club. She is a senior and plans to major in environmental science in college. She has taken five AP courses.

Mark came to the United States from Jamaica with his parents three years ago at the age of 12, and is a 15-year-old senior; he will graduate from high school at the age of 16. Reserved and pensive, he is one of the highest performing males (Black or White) in his senior class, according to his GPA which is a weighted 4.77. He has taken two AP courses. According to Mark, his parents immigrated to America because they wanted him to have greater college opportunities than are available in the Caribbean. He is a member of student council, the Ford High School Swim team, and he tutors on the weekends. He is an only child and plans to major in finance in college.

Paul's parents are married and are from Haiti. He is a junior and an outspoken young man with a strong personality. He is new to the AP program, having enrolled in his first AP course this year, but he is driven and focused and plans to remain on the AP track. Paul has expressed an interest in working in the music industry after graduating from college and is involved in a number of extra curricular activities at Ford. He would like to attend the University of Pennsylvania.

David's parents are divorced. He lives with his mother, stepfather, and two younger female siblings. His mother is from Jamaica and is employed as a certified nursing assistant. Her husband, David's stepfather, is Nigerian. David is a senior, a member of the cross-country team, the track and field team and likes to spend his free time rapping. He is involved with the student council, serves as assistant student representative to the Board of Education, has participated in the school musical for the past three years, is a member of the choir, is an editor of the school newspaper, and has

worked as a designer for the school magazine. He aspires to study journalism while in college and hopes to one day write for the New Yorker magazine. His idol is the writer Malcolm Gladwell. He is a senior and has taken four AP courses.

Kennedy is a senior. Although her parents are divorced, and she lives with her father and two siblings, she maintains a close relationship with her mother who lives an hour away. Both parents were born and raised in Nigeria and are college educated. Her father was awarded an academic scholarship to attend college in the United States and has earned a Masters degree in engineering; he currently works as an engineer. According to Kennedy, it is important to her father that she attends an Ivy League university; her plans are to apply to Cornell, Columbia, Emory, and Syracuse. She is a member of the school's volleyball team and the news network and is enrolled in her first AP course and is interested in studying economics in college.

Anthony is a senior. Both of his parents have advanced degrees. His mother earned a masters degree in accounting, and his father, who is the superintendent of a neighboring school district, holds a masters degree in education. Anthony is considering pursuing the path of a college professorship and describes himself as naturally competitive and ambitious. He has spent three consecutive summers enrolled in literature programs on the campuses of some of the most competitive colleges in the country: Kenyon University, Cornell University, and the University of Chicago. He is a member of the Teen Dating Awareness organization, has participated in the school musical for three years and has worked as a tutor. He has taken four AP courses.

Non Advanced Placement participants.

Sophia lives with her mother and two older siblings, but has a strong relationship with her father who lives in a different town. She describes herself as the "golden child"- the one who will make it. She transferred to Ford high from an urban school district at the start of her sophomore year. Sophia, a senior, plans to major in communications while in college and will pursue her dream of becoming a talk show host. She is conscientious, studious, and, based upon her grades, qualifies for AP English.

Steven's parents are both from Jamaica. He lives with his mother and brother, but visits his father, who lives in London, annually. Although he has an IEP (Individual Education Plan) due to his dyslexia, one would never guess that he has a disability. As a result of his involvement in the M.A.C. Scholars program, he has emerged as a leader who often takes initiative in the planning of monthly student meetings. He is affiliated with the stage crew organization, is the yearbook business manager, and is president of the MLKA club. Based upon his grades, he qualifies for Advanced Placement history. Steven is a senior.

Brendan, a senior, is well spoken and affable with a clear sense of his post college plans. Both of his parents are college graduates. His father is a computer engineer and his mother, also college educated, is a currently a stay at home mother taking care of Brendan and his three brothers. Based upon his grades, he qualifies for AP calculus.

Darryl is a senior and is excited about going to college; he has identified Hofstra University as his first choice. Based upon his grades and mathematical aptitude, he qualifies for AP calculus and is considering earning a degree in civil or industrial engineering. He was very eager to join the MAC Scholars program and was accepted into

the program at the beginning of this school year. Since joining, he has been involved in the planning of MAC meetings and looks forward to attending college. He is especially excited about going away to college, as he plans to complete his junior year in Tokyo through the Junior Year Abroad program.

Eva, a senior, was born in the United States to Haitian parents. Although her parents are divorced, both are very involved in her academic life, and she spends an equal amount of time with them. Her mother holds an advanced degree and works as an educator. Eva is a member of the marching band and, based upon her grades, she qualifies for AP French and AP calculus.

Discussion of Findings

AP participant themes.

Discomfort and isolation. Amidst the homogeneity of their classes, several students reported feeling uncomfortable and isolated in the AP classroom. Anthony, in the AP focus group, shared his experience as the only Black student in AP chemistry. He recalled that, "The stares are demoralizing, and uncomfortable." In the same focus group, Kennedy shared her opinion about the AP environment,

> I just feel that the (AP) environment is not welcoming to Black students who want to push themselves…I'm used to not having friends in my class. *They* [White students] are all friends – Then it's you. *They* [White students] all sit together-you're alone. You feel so isolated, and that makes it so stressful.

Agreeing with Kennedy, Monica added, "It's hard to feel comfortable."

In a one on one interview, David described the initial assessment that occurs among Black students when they enter a classroom for the first time, "When you're Black in AP, you kind of look around, and you're like, guess it's just us. From the start, you know there aren't a lot of Black people in AP. I was the only one in AP art history."

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Generally, students felt awkward being the only Black student in the classroom; this feeling was intensified when the class was directed to work in collaborative groups. In the same focus group, Kennedy shared the following, "When it's time for us to work in groups, it doesn't feel good when everyone has a group and the only Black student in the class doesn't."

Among the group, students' feelings of isolation were quite common, and although participants conveyed their feelings about being the only one, or being ignored, they were not detracted from their goals. One student mentioned surveying the room on the first day of class to count the number of Black students in the classroom, and another talked of how Black students were unable to make friends with White students, because in some of their classrooms, there was no sense of community. In addition to this, one student mentioned feeling like an outsider in the classroom, having not traveled through the grades and course levels with their White peers. According to Ford (1998),

> Issues surrounding isolation and social rejection are especially important for Black students in predominately White schools, gifted programs and AP classes. They may have difficulty forming friendships or building social networks with White classmates in such racially different settings. (Ford, 1998, p. 273)

This issue is prevalent among Black students in high level courses in which racial diversity is not the norm. In an effort to ensure that all students feel included, teachers should find ways to relate to all students and encourage them to interact with their peers. Mark, in the focus group, stated, "It does affect my performance. I want to stand out. At first it can be uncomfortable, because you don't feel equal."

Teacher expectations. The AP students shared their experiences in regards to how they were treated by their teachers in the learning environment. In the focus group, Juliet,

with a score of a 5 on her AP exam, believed that her teacher failed to recognize her

intellect, despite obtaining a perfect score on an AP examination and described how she

believed he perceived her, in spite of her academic acumen,

> I got a 5 on my AP exam, but still White people expect you to be stupid. This
> teacher wasn't as supportive as he was with his White students. He thought I was
> stupid and only paid attention to the White students.

Although Monica is currently enrolled in an AP course, she addressed the deficit thinking

that she experienced by her guidance counselor who asked her if she was certain that she

wanted to enroll in another AP class. In the one on one interview, she stated, "I still get

asked by my teachers…if I'm sure I want to take an AP…They don't expect you to be on

their level." David inferred that teacher expectations were low for Black students, "As a

Black student, it's definitely important to be in AP. It's not where they expect you to be."

Conversely, Juliet, in her one on one interview, was able to recall a White, male teacher

whom she felt understood her and made her feel welcome in his class, "I could tell he had

some Black friends. He understood me as a young Black woman. He knew that I worked

hard, and he was so understanding."

Contrary to Juliet's positive experience with one of her AP teachers, the findings

of this study, for most students, were aligned with the work of Ferguson (2003) which

suggested that, "A major concern of African Americans is that teachers underestimate

Black students' potential, not necessarily their performance" (Ferguson, 2003 p. 467).

This may be due to their previous experiences with African American students (Moore et

al., 2003; Moore et al., 2005, 2005b). What these findings found was that in some

instances, students believe that White teachers do not measure Black students by the

same standards by which White students are measured. This may result in low numbers

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of Black students who are identified and referred to high level courses. Deficit thinking

can result in diminished student confidence, as in the case of Juliet who stated that she

didn't "feel smart."

Non AP participant themes.

The comfort of honors. Honors students were forthcoming in their disinterest in

AP courses and revealed why they were not inclined to pursue this academic path. When

interviewed, they expressed that laziness and the need to feel comfortable in their classes

kept them on the Honors track. In her one on one interview, Eva admitted that she was

cruising through Honors and talked about the other factors which had cemented her

decision to remain in Honors,

> I don't want the stress of taking an AP. My French literature teacher told me I
> should try…but I had to figure out if I wanted to put forth the effort. I was losing
> sleep over it. I don't feel secure enough to hold my own ground. I think I found a
> middle ground with Honors, but I know that I'm cruising…My lazy side kicks
> in… It is that whole comfort zone thing.

Eva and Sophia explained that they associated AP courses with stress and inferred

that the friendships that they had cultivated in their classes contributed to their desire to

stay in Honors classes. Further, these students assumed that moving up to the more

rigorous AP environment would be too challenging, and would require increased effort

that they were not willing to exert.

In her one on one interview, Sophia stated that, for her, the evidence of her hard

work and drive were embedded in her grades and GPA, and not necessarily in the rigor of

the coursework. She also revealed that a classroom devoid of stress trumps rigor. "For

me, the drive wasn't there for AP. The biggest thing for me is my GPA. I get stressed out

too easily. I'm fine with Honors…" For Sophia, Honors was safe, stress free, and

comfortable. In Brendan's case, he admitted that he remained in Honors, because he was not motivated to do the work. "It's a lazy thing for me. I don't feel like doing the work that's required in AP."

Hearing from these students that comfort, and not a lack of aptitude, prevents them from taking AP courses leads one to consider how many other capable students are cruising in Honors and their reasons why. It might also be important to ask how we, as educators, can change the perceived culture of the AP environment, and encourage students to put forth the effort necessary to be successful in rigorous classes. This is critical, especially when we take their relative underexposure to high level course work into account (ACT, 2005; Trusty, 2002). Lastly, Eva's remark regarding her lack of self confidence may be an issue for other Black students who remain in Honors courses; low self concept may be at the root of the underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program. Building the self confidence of non AP students may be an area that can be addressed by the MAC Scholars program.

Themes for AP and Non AP students.

Lack of AP information. Some students reported that they became aware of the AP program after they arrived at Ford High School, and when the information did surface, it was subsequent to their freshman year and was not within a formal context, but rather, from friends, in passing. As stated by Brendan in the focus group interview,

> Freshman and sophomore year, I didn't know about AP and didn't even know that you had to take a test for it. Teachers don't tell you. After I heard about it (the AP exam), I looked in the cafeteria, and it was mostly White kids. I heard people talking about it in the hallway. I just haven't really thought about it since then.

Darryl, in the focus group, admitted how little he knew about AP,

> Me, too. I didn't know there was a test when I got to high school. I found out
> from friends…Last year (as a junior) when I was in Honors, Ms. Smith took some
> time out of the class period to tell us about AP. She's the first teacher who did
> that. So after she told us about it, I wanted to take the test for AP stats, but when I
> went to the room, no one was there. I didn't know who to ask about it, so I let it
> go. It was the only subject I was good at. I didn't know there was AP history. I
> would have taken an AP test, but I didn't know how to get in.

Given his AP background, David recognized the challenge that a lack of

information could pose for students in the lowest levels. These students might have the

capacity for excelling in rigorous courses, but may never learn about the AP program. He

stated in a one on one interview,

> I don't see anyone really committing to advertising AP classes in level 2 and level
> 3 classes…There's not the same push as in an Honors class. When you're in an
> Honors class, you're already aware of AP, as opposed to if you get stuck in level
> 3, you might never hear about it. As a student stuck in Level 3 you might have
> never have even heard of an AP class. Your parents are not going to be talking
> about it. And you might not have any older brothers and sisters to follow. My
> mom didn't know about it. I didn't know anything about it...There needs to be
> more advocacy about AP, as a school.

The damage caused as a result of a lack of information can be irreparable in the

form of missed educational opportunities and can have serious implications for college

access. Schools play a major role in providing educational information, helping students

take advantage of educational opportunities, and preparing students for success in post

secondary education and the workplace.

David's insight suggests that AP information should certainly be promoted and

explained to all students and parents, and disseminated in a formalized manner, beginning

at the middle school level. He also infers that a wider AP net should be cast at the high

school level to attract underrepresented students to the AP program. As noted by

McDonough (2005), students of color, when compared to their White counterparts, are

the least likely to obtain this information by the eighth grade. If students transition from middle school to high school unprepared for the rigorous secondary academic options that await them, the consequences could pose challenges for enrolling in and succeeding in high level courses (ACT, 2008). Failure to ensure that all students are provided with the requisite AP information at the middle school level will almost guarantee that school and district personnel will continue to miss opportunities to identify capable students. This helps to explain why middle school educators are integral to providing information to students and their parents about the AP program and thereby increasing college graduation rates (Adelman, 1999; College Board, 2012; McDonough, 2005; United Way, 2008).

The impact of guidance counselors. Several students discussed less than positive encounters with their guidance counselors. Monica, in the focus group interview, stated,

> I was told by my counselor that drawing is an easy A. I want to learn. As a Black student, I think the counselors think they should try to make things easy for you, because you're not smart enough. I don't want it to be easy.

Paul, in his one on one interview stated, "She's useless. She doesn't do anything." Steven had been recommended to AP by his history teacher, but told by his counselor that given his level three status, he would not be able to move up to AP, because, according to her, he would have to take an honors course before moving up to AP. Following is Steven's recollection of the incident during a one on one interview:

> Mr. Smith always pushed us to sign up for AP and filed the paperwork to recommend us for AP, so I decided that I would, but then I was told by my counselor that I couldn't move up, because you can't go from level 3 to AP- you need an Honors class. That happened to a lot of us. Our counselors wouldn't take Mr. Smith's recommendation. That made me really mad. I was told that I could, then I was told that I couldn't.

Interestingly, the course does not require that students sit for a qualifying examination; the only requirement to gain entrance into the course is a recommendation from the course teacher and a grade of an A in the previous course. In contrast, Sophia, who had a positive relationship with her counselor, shared the following in a one on one interview,

> I also have seriously the best guidance counselor anyone can ask for. I knew from being in [Freetown] that when you get to high school you have to know your guidance counselor. I talk to her a couple of times a week.

These data are important because they demonstrate that students' relationships with counselors differ from student to student. Some students are encouraged to extend themselves and have advocates to help them along the way, while others do not. The end result is that services are uneven and some students receive more assistance, guidance, and advocacy from their counselors than others. The data show that not all guidance counselors are meeting their students' needs and do not support students in their decisions to advance into AP courses. Without support and equitable services from their counselors, students will not receive the services to which they are entitled. This is problematic as it has implications for both course access and college access.

MAC Community. A sense of community emerged as another thematic finding of the study and was particularly apparent when students discussed the MAC program. According to Sophia in the one on one interview, "Before MAC we would just pass each other in the hallways; now we acknowledge each other, so I look forward to the meetings. We're the same people, with the same experiences." Kennedy, in her one on one interview, had this to say about the MAC program, "MAC unites Black students who are trying to do well, and who are working hard." Anthony, in his one on one interview stated, "Now, I look at my Black peers differently, like we're an academic family." It was

clear from students' responses to the question about the MAC Scholars program that MAC provided them with a sense of unity and togetherness. According to Eva in her focus group, "It helped me to form relationships and brought me closer to [a peer]. We need help and we're helping each other-we're kind of like a family and sometimes we say things [in meetings] that may help another person."

Based upon the data, it was clear that students from both groups had developed relationships with peers, as a result of their participation in the MAC Scholars program. All participants viewed the program as being positive and described the program in a familial context; this spoke to the connectedness that they had developed among their peers (Karcher, 2009). The responses of the participants suggested that the mentoring program provides a degree of community for students that is lacking in the classroom. Therefore, although community and relationship building should be the standard for every learning space, the MAC program is currently the only program which fills that need.

Parental support. In almost every instance, students discussed the importance of familial support that took a variety of forms (advising about courses, reading with them when they were young, accompanying them on college visits, and the expectation that they would go on to college, to name a few). Overwhelmingly, students discussed how their parents had contributed to their academic success. In the following account, Anthony told of how his parents helped him as he was introduced to college level opportunities, "My mom is very supportive. Once we learned about the program at Cornell, she started saving the four thousand dollars for me to attend. She makes sacrifices for me, so I can get to where I need to be." Across groups, the expectation and

the message from parents was that participants were expected to do well. Darryl

commented on his parents' involvement relative to his school decisions and

responsibilities:

> As far as course selections, they are all me. My parents help me mostly with
> college stuff, but high school is my responsibility. If they walk me through high
> school how will I make it through college? They make sure my essays are done
> and on time and deadlines are met, if I'm applying for early decision or early
> action…Sometimes I go [on college visits] with either my mom or dad.

Brendan, in the focus group, spoke of his mother's resourcefulness and her ability

to find a free SAT preparation course that his family would typically not have been able

to afford. He stated,

> In the summer of my junior year, I went to a free SAT classes in New York on
> Saturdays. My mom found out about it and told me to do it. I had to get up early
> to get there, but that was when I seriously started thinking about college. On the
> ride there, my dad and I were talking about college and about my top 5 schools.

In the focus group, Juliet spoke of the pride in her heritage and the importance of

hard work that her parents had instilled in her, "My parents are Nigerian. They always

told me to push myself, so I'm fortunate to have parents who push me. I remember that I

was reading all of the time. We are very proud people, and so working hard is expected."

Like the findings of the study, Henderson and Berla (1994) found that parent

support came in many forms; this was the case with the study participants. It is important

to know that although these parents are not all able to provide the typical, traditional kind

of support that teachers, counselors, and schools expect, parents support their children in

their own way. The majority of students reported that their parents were supportive of

them and inquired regularly about school, took students to visit colleges, helped with

course decisions, paid for summer programs, and worked with their children on college

applications, so although there were differences in the ways in which parents supported

their children, the message was clear that the destination was college.

Self-efficacy. This quality was woven throughout the experiences of both groups

of students and emerged as a strong theme of the study. Students were motivated to

achieve success, and although their paths were somewhat different, the end goal remained

the same, in terms of their post secondary plans. The AP students were motivated to

remain in the program by internal factors such as their expectations, the standards to

which they held themselves, and their confidence to persevere. Non AP students also

demonstrated self-efficacy within their Honors environment. For instance, Brendan,

recently made the shift from self-admitted "slacker" to that of a student who

demonstrated a more serious, focused approach to school and explained why grades have

increased in importance for him:

> Grades are very important to me now. I slacked as a freshman and sophomore, but
> in my junior year, I got mostly As and Bs. I'm taking it as seriously as possible
> now. It has a lot to do with basketball. I was slacking because I took things
> lightly. I didn't have my priorities set…No one's fault but mine. All that really
> mattered to me was playing basketball. When I realized that I could talk about
> sports on TV, I got serious. I got serious about school, because of my career
> aspirations. I knew I had to get my grades up.

Sophia made reference to the seriousness with which she approached academics when

she stated in her one on one interview, "The biggest thing for me is my GPA." In the

focus group, Kennedy recalled, "I had a teacher tell me I'm not good enough for AP, but

I would say to other students, don't listen to them." Despite the lack of encouragement

from her teacher, Kennedy did enroll in her first AP class as a senior. Juliet, in the focus

group interview, described how she persevered after having a teacher who intimated that

she was engaged in untoward behavior, "I told him I was going to an AP workshop, and

he accused me of skipping class and says, 'Did you have MAC Scholars?' in this really

sarcastic way, but I persevered."

Paul was determined to prove his intellect to his teachers and peers. When asked

about how they navigate the AP environment, during the focus group interview, he stated,

"I feel like, oh, you don't want me? Then I have to do well." Anthony stated the

following,

> I've always known I was going to college. Junior year was my first year taking an AP class. I didn't take any during my sophomore year, because of a lack of confidence, and it's one of my biggest regrets. The way I see it is if you value education, you have no choice but to take APs. I'm ambitious, and I prioritize. I have big dreams, and I'm only 16…I've always been working towards this. I went from taking one AP last year to 3 this year.

Whether participants focused on improving their grades, showed determination

with regard to excelling in their classes, or were intent on proving to their teachers that

they deserved their seats in courses, it was apparent that Honors and AP students

exhibited a level of conscientiousness that propelled them towards their goals. This is

supported by Netsky (2006) whose work focused on resilient students who were

motivated to succeed.

Gendered themes.

AP identity (AP males). AP identity plays a significant role in the lives of the

male AP students in terms of how they view themselves and the value that they placed on

being in the AP program. Paul, in the focus group, had a very strong opinion about his

academic prowess and his need to prove himself, "This is my first AP, and I'm the only

Black male in there. I'm not scared. I think I'm smarter than them all, so the environment

doesn't really matter. I'm not fazed that I'm the only Black student. I have to prove

myself." Paul's belief that he has to prove himself in order to be accepted by others in the

AP community supports the findings of Henfield, Moore, and Wood (2008). They found that African American students often find themselves having to justify who they are as scholars and as members of the Black race.

Anthony, in the one on one interview, took a different approach and inferred that being successful in AP not only has implications for college, but also helped to strengthen one's connection with other AP students, "Once you're in the AP environment…having it on your transcript…it changes your options, and once you're in, it becomes a part of you when you're around other AP people." This supports Hemmings (1996) who suggests that students' identities are fortified through their relationships with peers. Anthony stated, "I have to set an example for Black scholarship." From his perspective, the responsibility of serving as a representative for high achieving Black students outweighed the discomfort that he faced in class. This supports the work of Whiting (2006a, 2006b), who found that among Black males, focusing on academic success holds more value than forming friendships in the classroom. Furthermore from Anthony's vantage point, it was his responsibility to ensure that the image of the Black student was positive.

David, in a one on one interview, explained why, as a Black student, it was important to be included in the AP culture, "As a Black student, it's definitely important to be in AP." He suggested that textbooks were symbolic of one's accomplishments and should serve as a reminder to those who were not enrolled in AP classes of their capabilities. "When you're walking around with your big text books, it's like guys [referring to Black peers not in AP], you can do it!"

These participants had very clear ideas about what AP represented for them and suggested that the AP identity that they embraced was strongly connected to their determination and commitment to succeed. Moreover, these students did well in spite of the negativity that they faced (Sanders, 1998).

Community within the learning environment (females). This is a gendered theme, as female students readily articulated their need for interaction and community. They wanted their teachers to help them to get to know their classmates and, in that same vein, wanted to communicate more with their teachers. Based upon participant interviews, a sense of community and relationships within the classroom were important components of students' learning environments. For the Honors students, having friends in their classrooms was essential to their comfort. As stated by Sophia in the focus group interview, "I feel more comfortable when I'm around my friends. I do want to do better, but I want to be comfortable, too." The AP students wanted to establish relationships with both their teachers and their White peers. In the focus group, Monica made the following observation,

> It's so important that teachers help us to get to know one another, I mean, I know they don't want to be friends with me outside of class, but in class, it would be helpful if we could build some type of class community, so that people don't feel left out and just plain awkward. Have conversations with me about me! It's so discouraging when you feel that your teachers don't care about who your are…It doesn't feel good to feel invisible, and the only time your teacher talks to you is when you approach him or her to ask a question.

Juliet, in the same focus group interview, recalled her days as a freshman, new to Ford High School, and her impression of the AP classroom,

> There are no Black students. I'm not going to do it. That was me freshman year, as far as AP. I'm looking for community and help, especially when I want to have conversations about race. I want a Black community.

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As she continued, she expressed her belief about student/teacher relationships and made reference to a former teacher in the focus group interview, "…He didn't get to know me personally; that's what a teacher is supposed to do. He isolated himself in a corner and helped the White students." Monica added a final thought about her desire to communicate with her teacher, "…I don't want to be given an assignment and told to do it. I need some interaction."

The importance of creating community centered learning spaces for students includes identifying culturally sensitive teachers who impart essential relationship building in the classroom (Dance, 2002; Lareau, 2000). This cannot be overstated, because our goal as educators should be to create the type of culture in school buildings, and more specifically in classrooms, that are inclusive and inviting for all students.

Summary

In summarizing the chapter, it is clear that a lack of access to AP information, the identification and recommendation processes, and teacher and counselor attitudes are among the factors which lead to the underrepresentation of students in the AP program. Anther component is the Honors students who, although motivated to do well, did not believe that they had to enroll in AP in order to be attain success. They placed great emphasis on achieving high grades, as they understood the connection between grades, GPA, and preparing for the demands of college, and ultimately their desired careers, but did not articulate an understanding of the leverage that comes with having several AP courses on one's high school transcript.

Chapter V

Discussion and Conclusions

Chapter 5 presents a summary of the study, as well as conclusions drawn from the data found in Chapter 4, and answers the research questions. Recommendations for policy and practice will be noted, implications will be addressed, and the impact that the results of this study may have on my leadership practice are discussed.

A review of the data validated that Critical Race Theory was an appropriate tool to use to identify and critique the inequities of the school policies and practices that exist within the context of Ford High School. Moreover, the CRT framework enabled me to bring attention to the ways in which racism presents itself in learning environments (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1998; Solorzano, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Yosso, 2002). By exposing both the subtle and not so subtle behaviors, practices, and structures that exist in schools, we can begin to do the work that is necessary to avert and dismantle the obstacles that prohibit equitable learning environments for students.

At the core of the low enrollment of Black students in the AP program is a deeply embedded tracking system, and as a result of this practice, race is firmly institutionalized. Tracking in the school district begins to emerge in the sixth grade and continues through high school. As such, it inhibits access to AP for Black students, creating a system of stratification and maintaining a pattern of inequality (Oakes, 1997). This tracking structure can be seen when one looks into the classrooms of Ford High. Classrooms populated by primarily White students are AP classrooms. Classrooms in which almost all of the available seats are filled with Black students are level 2 classes. This is an

interesting phenomenon given that the majority of the student population is Black. When one listens to students' stories of discomfort and isolation being the "only one" in an AP class, and the stories that were conveyed about reaching an impasse when attempting to enroll in more rigorous classes, or hearing students share their desires to have community within the learning environment, it is clear that the district's tracking system yields an inequitable, uneven playing field for Black students.

For many of the participants, the issues of race and racism present themselves in their classrooms and follow them through their school experiences. Thus, it was important to use the CRT tenet of counter story telling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002b) to analyze their stories. This allowed me to make a determination relative to the degree to which they are affected by race and to ascertain if and how they were able to mitigate these challenges. By examining the experiences of students who were enrolled in AP and Honors, I was able to uncover how and why students arrive at their decisions regarding AP participation. The following discussion is a synopsis of students' stories. It highlights several factors which, according to the data collected, have contributed to the racial gap in AP.

Participants spoke of their lack of AP information upon entering high school. This was supported by McDonough (2003) who found that Black students, and students of color in general, are inadequately prepared for the rigors of high school and, consequently, are not represented equitably in the AP program. With this in mind, it is apparent that that a greater emphasis must be placed on preparing students during the pre AP years, as this would provide them with pertinent programmatic information prior to entering high school (Adams, 2012).

In addition to students' inability to procure information about the AP program, the identification, selection, and recommendation processes utilized by schools also prevent Black students from enrolling in AP (Ford, 1998; Johnson & Kritsonis, 2006; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). These processes have also been problematic for Ford students. Steven's story supports the work of Solorzano and Yosso (2000b) who found that some school experiences limit students' access to AP. Moreover, a study by Jenkins (as cited in Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008), found that although many Black students scored well on intelligence tests, they were not recommend for gifted programs.

When Black students are left out of AP programming, it is often the case that they are overrepresented in the lower academic tracks (Ford, 1995; Oakes, 1990). This is problematic, because according to Oakes (1985), the instruction that students are exposed to in the lower levels is inferior to instruction in the advanced classes. According to Flores (1997), this can result in an opportunity gap for Black students, because those students who are in low level classes in high school, were probably enrolled in low level classes in elementary and middle school and are, therefore, less likely to have the academic capacity to succeed in rigorous classes. Relegating students to low level courses for the duration of their schooling results in fewer students who are identified for AP classes. Moreover, as David speculated, recommendations for higher-level courses are generally initiated by teachers who teach Honors courses, not by teachers who teach levels two and three. As a result, pertinent information pertaining to one's options regarding rigorous courses is not accessible to students in lower levels.

A prominent issue among students focused on expectations that some teachers held for Black students. Like the findings of the current study, Cohen (1984), Cohen,

Kepner, and Swanson (1995), and Cohen and Lotan (1995), suggested that some teachers did not expect Black students to meet the academic level of their White counterparts, a concern that manifested itself in classrooms. According to Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008), the term used to describe teachers' low expectations towards a particular group of students is deficit thinking. This negative way of thinking about students can hinder access to higher level courses for Black students, and can result in low numbers of Black students being recommended for AP courses. Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) found that teacher expectations changed based upon the ethnic backgrounds of their students and determined that White students were favored over Black and Latino students. Thus, access to AP could be impacted by the expectations held by students' White teachers. As such, Henfield, Moore, and Wood (2008) posit that this way of thinking has led teachers to assume that Black students do not have the intellectual capacity to be successful in higher level courses, can steer students away from rigorous courses, and can ultimately damage self esteem (Bonner, 2000; Ford, 1995; Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008).

Several participants reported that most interactions with school counselors were not helpful and led students to make decisions about course selections largely on their own. This is aligned with Leitman, Binns, and Unni (1995), who contended that, "Some students make course selection decisions with little guidance from counselors" (Leitman et al., 1995 p. 8). It was a significant discovery during this study and served as an indicator for the need to overhaul school counseling. If counselors are to be of any help to racially and culturally diverse students, it is first necessary for them to have an understanding of the students who fall within these groups around self perceptions, racial identity, and self concept (Ford, 2003).

Through my study, I determined that the desire for community and relationships in the classroom was more striking among females than males. I did not discover studies that supported these findings from a gendered perspective, but studies have found when positive relationships are established and sustained between teachers and their students, and when students feel that their teachers care about them, student performance is enhanced (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ferguson 2005; Gay 2000; Ladson Billings, 2004; Marzano, 2001). Further, Gay (2000) asserted that, "Educators should be cognizant of the fact that cooperation, collaboration, and community are prominent themes, techniques, and goals when educating Latino, Native American, African American, and Asian American students." (Gay, 2000, p. 158). According to Villegas and Lucas (2002a), Black and Latino groups tend to value human connectedness in a way that is not often observed in European cultures.

This study also found that most students felt supported by their parents. This echoed the findings of Stewart (2007) who cited 13 studies that showed that African American parent involvement has a positive effect on students' learning outcomes. Stewart (2007) captures this concept, "The home environment itself plays a role in the extent of persistence and achievement of an individual in any particular endeavor" (p. 20). Floyd (1996) as well as Jeynes (2007) found that parental involvement and advocacy is critical to student success in school and that most parents who have academically successful students engage their children in conversations about school (Yan, 1999). Toldson (2008) and Trusty (2002) found that as it relates to Black males, there was a relationship between parents' expectations and their level of involvement in their

children's academic lives. With the exception of one of the Black males, all of the male students spoke of the support that they received from their parents.

Racial identity was evident in the study and prominent among the male AP students who connected their racial identity to the AP program (Hemmings, 1996). This does not support Bonner (2000) who found that students abandoned cultural ties to their Black peers in order to assimilate into the largely White AP culture. Instead, these participants articulated a sense of responsibility towards their Black male peers who were in lower levels urging them to join them in AP courses. They were also intent on proving their abilities and set out to establish themselves as scholars. One student held on to the belief that he was "smarter than them all" and was not "afraid" of the AP environment. These students embraced their participation in AP and never mentioned having ever been accused of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Likewise, the Honors students did not mention that this was a problematic for them and claimed that their primary reasons for staying in Honors was because of the comfort that they felt and a lack of desire to do the work that was required in AP.

In summary, it is apparent that several contributing factors are responsible for the low enrollment of Black students in the AP program. These factors, which include various school structures and practices, play a significant role in influencing students' decisions and in limiting the number of students who participate in rigorous courses. The end result is an achievement gap attributable to the educational opportunity gaps that are pronounced in this study (Flores, 2007).

Research Question #1

What can we learn from the experiences of Black students who are currently enrolled in AP, and how can their experiences be used to encourage other minority high school students to participate?

The data revealed that all of the participants, at some juncture, felt uncomfortable and isolated within the AP environment, yet they persevered. The male students used their identity as AP students to highlight their scholarship and to set an example for their peers. David shared the following, "As a Black student, it's definitely important to be in AP. It's not where they expect you to be. When you're walking around with your big text books, it's like guys [referring to Black peers not in AP], you can do it." In David's case, his textbooks were symbolic of his identity. Anthony felt a sense of duty and responsibility as a Black male in AP and stated, "The stares are demoralizing, and uncomfortable, but I have to set an example for Black scholarship."

Anthony went on to say, "Once you're in the AP environment…having it on your transcript…it changes your options, and once you're in, it becomes a part of you when you're around other AP people." Conversely, the females did not focus on status. They, however, were clear about their need for community and interaction in their classrooms. As Monica stated, "I'm looking for community and help, especially when I want to have conversations about race. I want a Black community."

Although they felt isolated and uncomfortable, all of the participants demonstrated self-efficacy, scored well on AP exams, and did not allow negative classroom environments to thwart their ambitions and goals. Students who had become part of the AP culture continued to enroll in AP courses, suggesting that their

experiences, which were often negative, had no bearing on their desire to continue to participate. For example, Juliet, who obtained a 5 on an AP exam, shared that with the group that her perfect score did not equate with how she felt internally. "I got a 5 on the AP Chem exam, but I don't feel smart." This may somehow be connected to her experiences in the classroom with the teacher whom she perceived had low expectations of her, and was surprised when she was studying. However, Juliet remained resilient.

Despite all of their experiences, these AP students find it within themselves to encourage their peers to enroll in the AP program; however, given the stories of the AP students, their peers who are in lower levels who qualify for the program might certainly be deterred from enrolling. Perhaps the self-efficacy and determination of the AP students might serve as motivation for other students to consider enrolling. It could even serve as a reminder to others that tenacity, drive, and a laser like focus on success should be integral to their academic decisions. Juliet's remark regarding the discomfort experienced, due to lack of diversity, puts this into perspective, "… being the only one, should not be used as a reason to stay in lower level classes."

Research Question #2

What factors discourage and/or prevent qualified Black students from enrolling in the AP program?

Studies have found that the identification, selection, and recommendation processes utilized by many schools can prevent Black students from enrolling in AP (Ford, 1998; Johnson, 2006; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). David, an AP student shed some light on a school practice that might prevent qualified Black students from enrolling in the AP program. He stated that the invitation to enroll was generally initiated

by teachers who taught Honors courses, not from teachers who teach level two or three classes. He said, "When you're in an Honors class, you're already aware of AP, as opposed to if you get stuck in level 3, you might never hear about it." Consequently, information pertaining to one's options beyond the lowest level courses may never reach students in lower levels. This raised questions about the feasibility of qualified students in the lower levels ever having access to AP information.

The most common reason that the non AP students gave for not enrolling in AP, however, was their discomfort with the rigor of AP. Eva gave her reason for staying in Honors:

> I had to figure out if I wanted to put forth the effort. I was losing sleep over it. I don't feel secure enough to hold my own ground. I think I found a middle ground with Honors, but I know that I'm cruising…My lazy side kicks in… It is that whole comfort zone thing.

They were also reluctant to leave the comfort of their Honors classes, as having friends in classes with them was also important. Sophia noted, "I feel more comfortable when I'm around my friends. I want to do better, but I want to be more comfortable, too." According to Eva, "Freshman year, I walked past a classroom. I knew it was AP because they were all White. We want to stay with our friends. If I moved out of my safety box, I'd feel uncomfortable." Sophia shared that a stress free environment was important to her, "For me, the drive wasn't there for AP. The biggest thing for me is my GPA. I get stressed out too easily. I'm fine with Honors." Similarly, Brendan stated the following, "I heard all the stories about all of the work. You have to really apply yourself early, but I was lazy early on." Additionally, Eva did not want to risk failure in an AP course. She

intimated that this was also a concern for her, "I don't feel secure enough to hold my own ground."

Lastly, Honors students were aware of AP, but did not show an interest in enrolling. Therefore, a lack of desire, or perhaps a lack of motivation, was standing in the way of rigorous coursework. Eva stated, "My mom is an educator in New York, so she knows about AP and encouraged me to push for AP, because she says it looks better on a transcript. We had family conversations about going into AP. Even my friends tried to encourage me. " Sophia also shared that she, too, learned of the AP program at her former high school, "I learned about AP when I was an ambassador at my old high school. They talked about it a few times."

Research Question #3

How do students' relationships with parents and school personnel (administrators, teachers, counselors) and their connection to the school affect their desire to participate in the AP program?

With the exception of one student, participants reported that their parents were supportive and encouraging, such as Anthony who mentioned that his mother had saved $4000 for him to attend a writing program at Cornell University. He said, "She makes sacrifices for me, so I can get to where I need to be." Brendan's mother found a free SAT preparation course for him to attend,

> In the summer of my junior year, I went to a free SAT classes in New York on Saturdays. My mom found out about it and told me to do it. I had to get up early to get there, but that was when I seriously started thinking about college. On the ride there, my dad and I were talking about college and about my top 5 schools.

Furthermore, all of the AP students in this study had at least one story to share about their relationships with teachers and school counselors, and many referenced the need for community and interaction. Female students desired a feeling of community and connectedness in the classroom. Gay (2000) determined that educators who teach children of color should be mindful of these needs. Juliet stated, "He didn't get to know me personally. That's what a teacher is supposed to do."

Some students reported that they had positive relationships with their teachers and guidance counselors; however, others revealed that neither counselors nor teachers encouraged them to take AP courses, and in some cases, they had been discouraged from advancing to AP. This issue was illuminated by Monica who stated, "I still get asked by teachers…if I'm sure I want to take an AP… They don't expect you to be on their level…When I give my opinion, it's like, did she come up with that by herself?" Steven's example of his guidance counselor who ignored the recommendation of his teacher to move him from level 3 to AP, and Kennedy's experience with a teacher who discouraged her from enrolling in the AP program, highlight the need to ensure that guidance counselors and teachers understand the impact that they have on their students.

Students desired "community and help" and "support" and wanted "interaction" with their teachers and White peers in their learning spaces. Instead, however, they reported that they often felt isolated and ignored. Ford (1995) addresses the importance of ensuring that teachers are trained in multiculturalism and contends that expertise in this area could bolster the number of Black students identified for high level courses. Thus, the participants' desire to feel connected to their teachers and peers could be met through culturally responsive teaching. It is an appropriate strategy to incorporate in all

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classrooms, as it places an emphasis on how teachers demonstrate caring, build

communities within the classroom, and communicate with ethnically diverse students

(Gay, 2000).

Students' negative experiences with teachers and guidance counselors who

discouraged them from enrolling in AP courses may also contribute to the

underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program. As an example, Steven's

guidance counselor ignored the recommendation of his teacher which was to advance him

into an AP history course. One guidance counselor, however, based upon students'

accounts, appeared to be the exception and received consistent praise from study

participants based upon her availability and genuinely caring disposition. Judging from

their feedback, she seemed to have a real interest in her students.

Students' experiences validated the research on counselors and teachers as the

gatekeepers of AP courses, thus denying access to qualified students (Ford et al., 2008).

Non AP students and AP students had similar relationships with teachers and guidance

counselors. With this in mind, teacher and school counselor expectations can have a

significant effect on students' desire to participate in AP, and these school employees are

more likely to demonstrate lower expectations for minority students and low income

students than for other students (Hale-Benson, 1986).

Research Question #4

In what ways do school and district practices contribute to the

underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program?

Tracking, and its system of sorting students, exacerbates the racial achievement

gap and contributes to the low numbers of Black students enrolled in the AP program

(Oakes, 1985). This socially constructed system based upon people's beliefs about students' perceived abilities creates, at Ford High School, two schools within a school (Oakes & Guiton, 1995). The majority of the Black student population is relegated to low level classes, while White students are the predominate race in high level classes. One Honors student recalled walking past a classroom and making a decision not to enroll in AP based solely on the fact that the classroom was not racially diverse. This might explain why Honors students prefer to stay in classes where they are with their friends, as this provides a level of comfort for them. AP students, however, despite the discomfort, continue to enroll in AP classes, but feel isolated in racially homogeneous classrooms where they are the "only ones."

The district should continue to work on dismantling tracking, over time, despite the challenges that are inherent in this type of endeavor. Additionally, the current tracking system justifies the need for district leaders to build strong counseling programs at the middle school level, as strong programs would encourage students to have conversations with their counselors about AP courses prior to entering high school. This would also facilitate articulation between the two middle schools and the high school. Heightened college readiness awareness would enable students to explore the types of AP courses that might be of interest to them (ACT Policy Report, 2005). As such, students would have an advantage with regard to high school preparation.

Research Question #5

What measures can school and district personnel take to increase access, equity, rates of enrollment, and success for Black students relative to the AP program?

Clearly, the district could increase access, equity, enrollment, and success for Black students by reducing tracking and focusing on the trajectories of middle school students. If the district is to see higher rates of enrollment and success in AP courses on the high school level, the goal must be to increase the academic success of middle school students. Specifically, middle school aged students must demonstrate success in Algebra. This will serve as an indicator of the rigorous coursework that they will select in high school (Musen, 2010) and will increase the likelihood that students will enroll in advanced math courses. Success in Algebra also yields higher college attendance rates, higher rates of graduation, and is an indicator of job readiness (Achieve, 2008). Moreover, studies suggest that algebra readiness begins as early as the preschool years with the teaching of mathematical skills which provide students with the ability to succeed in rigorous courses as they advance through school (Achieve, 2008).

Due to the fact that tracking surfaces in middle school, it is critical that the trajectory for rigorous classes begins early. Tracking adds another dimension to the AP access problem, as students from low-income backgrounds and people of color (primarily African Americans and Latino students) have been consistently left out of programs and courses designed for the gifted and talented and are often relegated to lower tracks (Oakes & Lipton, 1990). If we are to ensure access to rigorous courses for all students, processes for eliminating or reducing racial stratification must begin in middle school.

Thus, education leaders must ensure that teachers and counselors have a firm understanding of district policies around AP participation. More critical, however, is the ability of educators to foster an environment and create a culture in which students are encouraged to enroll in AP courses.

Developing relationships with Black students could also be integral to closing the racial AP gap, as strong student teacher relationships can cross racial lines. Moreover, creating community centered learning spaces for students includes identifying teachers who impart essential relationship building in the classroom (Dance, 2002; Lareau, 2000). As noted in the study, students expressed a desire to interact with their teachers and did not mention race when they articulated their desire to communicate with teachers. For example, Monica stated the following, "I don't want to be given an assignment and told to do it. I need some interaction."

Teachers could benefit from professional development opportunities that focus on community building and effective communication with ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2000). Students desired meaningful interactions with their teachers and sought to make valuable connections with them. Juliet, referenced her days as a freshman new to Ford, "I'm looking for community and help, especially when I want to have conversations about race. I want a Black community." She also stated, "…He didn't get to know me personally. That's what a teacher is supposed to do."

Another factor linked to the underrepresentation of Black students in AP classes centers on teacher expectations (Johnson & Kritsonis, 2006). According to Ferguson (2003), if a teacher does not believe that a student has the capacity to do well in rigorous courses, he or she will discourage students from enrolling, which often results in students

not considering AP courses (Darity et al., 2001). This was the case with Kennedy who was discouraged from taking an AP class and, consequently, waited until her senior year to enroll in her first AP course. An increase in Black teachers might result in an increase in expectations for Black students, as teachers who share the same race and background may take have a greater understanding and may take more of an interest in students, thereby raising expectations (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2005).

Thus, teachers who aim to make a difference in the lives of diverse learners need to possess the disposition required to teach and reach all learners equitably (Villegas & Lucas, 2004). Ferguson (2002) also found that a premium should be placed on professional development that highlights the importance of relationships among teachers and students. The anticipated outcome of this shift could result in an increase in more comfortable learning spaces, reduced feelings of isolation for students, and more students who enroll in rigorous courses.

Research Question #6:

How can Critical Race Theory provide insight into students' experiences that can assist with increasing Black student achievement?

The 1995 publication of *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education* has been used by scholars to analyze and critique educational research and practice, and make sense of the racial inequities that persist in the U.S. (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Beyond that, it has been utilized to illuminate issues pertaining to race in schools by giving a voice to students and enabling them to share their experiences. Using this theoretical approach, I was able to assess their resilience, self-efficacy, and tenacity, and discern the role that these qualities play in their academic lives.

Thus, CRT can increase the achievement of Black students by using the information gleaned from the current study to not only shed light on the issues that currently exist, but to use student experiences to change the landscape of the AP classroom. One experience was Steven's example of his guidance counselor who ignored the recommendation of his teacher to move him from level 3 to AP.

Monica's also shared that her guidance counselor attempted to steer her away from the AP program. Based upon the accounts of the study participants, it is evident that the perpetuation of low expectations, as described by Solozano and Yosso (2001) and negative learning spaces continue to reveal themselves in classrooms at Ford High School. As David pointed out, "As a Black student, it's definitely important to be in AP. It's not where they expect you to be." Or Kennedy who was discouraged from taking an AP was reminded of what she was told by her teacher, "…I'm not good enough for AP…" who is now enrolled in an AP class. She summarized how challenging it was for Black students to feel connected with their White peers in AP classes, "When it's time for us to work in groups, it doesn't feel good when everyone has a group and the only Black student in the class doesn't." Monica's statement also speaks to how students feel in the classroom, "It doesn't feel good to feel invisible, and the only time your teacher talks to you is when you approach him or her to ask a question." Ultimately, participants wanted to connect with their peers and teachers and simply wanted to feel comfortable in their classrooms. They wanted to be seen both literally and figuratively.

Limitations of the Study

Interviewing students proved to be challenging due to time constraints, as most participants were unable to stay after school due to extra curricular activities, family responsibilities, or work obligations. Consequently, the majority of the interviews were scheduled during the school day, requiring teachers to release students from classes, which was not ideal. Another limitation exists in the raw data that were collected during this study. The data consists of the perceptions of 12 Black students with their own stories about their school experiences. However, there is no statistical support or documentation of additional interviews to validate or negate their stories. Thus, the attitudes of parents, middle school and high school guidance counselors, the director of guidance, the school principal, and teachers may have proved valuable to the study. Furthermore, observations of students in their respective classrooms may have provided the researcher with an additional perspective of the participants as learners in their learning environments. Given time restraints, however, this was not feasible.

Implications

The findings from this study offer implications for policy makers and educators and reveal the resilience of these students as they encounter challenges connected to race. Upon completion of the study, several implications became apparent and could be explored for further research. Following are suggestions that the district might consider, but it is important to note that the effectiveness of each suggestion must be measured, and teachers and administrators must be held accountable for successful implementation. The first implication suggests that tracking should be eliminated, or the number of levels (tracks) should be reduced, because race at Ford High impacts equity. For most Black

students relegated to the lowest levels, the entrenched practice of separating students by perceived ability inhibits them from experiencing rigorous coursework and traps them in within a largely inflexible system where most will remain for their entire high school career. The highest of these levels are virtually impenetrable by students in the lowest levels who tend to have the least information about how to enroll in rigorous courses. Thus, the students who have the most academic needs continue to be underserved. District leaders, then, should focus on eradicating a system that perpetuates a lack of motivation, isolation, and low expectations for students.

A second implication is related to ensuring that all students are provided with AP information that will aid them in making informed decisions about their academic trajectories. It would be beneficial for students and their parents to be introduced to the AP program in middle school. If this were implemented, decisions pertaining to course selection and career aspirations would be considered before students enter high school. Consequently, information about the AP program should be extended to the middle school. This will serve to level the playing field, because as early a middle school, some students are already being encouraged by their knowledgeable parents about the rigorous course options that await them at the high school level.

In addition, counselors would benefit from collaborating with fellow educators (e.g., teachers, and principals) to develop more inclusive recruitment practices. They should ensure that information relative to the AP program is made available to all students, as this will aid in normalizing the AP program, thereby increasing the rates of enrollment for Black students. Moreover, school counselors should focus on developing an understanding of the challenges that Black students face, because when students move

from Honors to AP, they are leaving the more diverse Honors classes to be either the only Black student, or one of a few Black students in a classroom. This can be problematic for many students, as their learning experiences may change based upon the lens through which they are viewed by teachers, how they are perceived by their peers, and even more critical, the lens through which they view themselves.

A third implication suggests a selective approach to appointing teachers to teach AP courses; they must be teachers who will serve all students well. This practice would require that those selected to teach AP would be hired based upon multiple measures such as: positive interactions with students, contributions to the work of social justice, recommendations from students, involvement in school program initiatives relative to the AP gap, and student surveys. This would provide prospective candidates with a clear understanding of the tools that are needed when addressing the needs of underrepresented and marginalized students. These teachers would also be required to demonstrate effective strategies used to promote the AP program, thereby encouraging the participation of Black students who might not have otherwise considered enrolling.

The selection process may be responsible for low enrollment. As such, the fourth implication centers on clear entrance criteria and guidelines that should be promoted beyond the walls of the guidance offices. Currently, selection is subjective and based largely upon grades and teacher/counselor recommendation, but each teacher and guidance counselor has autonomy over who is selected. Based upon the experience of one of the study participants, the ability to enroll in an AP course can be overridden somewhere between the teacher recommendation and the student's meeting with his or her counselor. There must be established structures to ensure that teachers' requests are

honored by counselors. To that end, the creation of an AP council to monitor the process would eliminate gatekeeper practices.

Findings from the current study suggest that teachers and counselors may have opportunities to improve relationships with Black students by analyzing their classroom environments and guidance practices for the presence of obstacles that might preclude students from participating in the AP program. As such, the final implication suggests that educators might consider seeking opportunities to develop relationships with Black students and their families through improved communication. School staff (teachers, counselors, and administrators) are positioned to provide support and critical information to Black students and their parents; therefore, it would also be beneficial to partner with schools that have similar demographics and similar AP equity challenges to implement programs and activities relevant to the needs of Black students in these settings.

Implications for Practice

Upon reflection of the current study, implications for practice are noted. The first implication pertains to the tracking system. It is clear that the tracking system hinders access to AP courses at Ford. The MAC program could be used to provide information to middle school students by expanding the current program and creating a MAC middle school mentoring initiative. It would require that MAC Scholars from Ford High serve as mentors to 7th and 8th graders at the two middle schools and lead activities centered on self efficacy and motivation, self concept, and academic tutoring. An additional component of the program would explain the connection between enrolling in rigorous high school courses and succeeding in college. Lastly, an AP for a Day event would entail the shadowing of high school students by middle school students who would spend

the day with them in their AP classes. This would serve to give them a glimpse into AP coursework and expectations.

Modifying, or dismantling the tracking system is a formidable undertaking. Therefore, changes such as creating an open access system (which would make AP available to any student who chose to participate) would need to be implemented over time. Open access, however, would enable students to pursue AP without the need for teachers' recommendations, clearance from the guidance department, content supervisors' signatures, principals' signatures, and other bureaucratic obstacles. With the establishment of open access, students would have the liberty to pursue the academic path of his or her choosing. Further, open access might foster a school culture that would encourage increased numbers of Black students to try AP with friend. This could reduce isolation and perhaps increase the motivation of Honors students and others who are capable, but who prefer to stay in the comfort of their Honors classes.

Based upon the data, female students have a need for community in the classroom. It would be interesting to extend the study to determine how gender effects surface in the classroom. Additionally, the formation of an AP Council could oversee the selection/decision process and by extension, ensure parity and equity. Many students have the potential to excel in AP classes, but may not meet the admissions criteria. Fortunately, it is the intention of Ford high school to change the way that students are identified for AP courses by increasing enrollment through the implementation of the Equal Opportunity Schools program which makes deliberate efforts to identify "missing" students. Next, research which focuses on the effects of isolation and discomfort on students' self esteem and psyche would be worthy of study.

My Leadership

Leaders who advocate for social justice believe that inequities are unnatural and seek to remove barriers that prevent all students from experiencing equal treatment. Further, social justice is described as a leadership style that is concerned with creating positive school relationships (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bogotch, 2000a; Goldfarb & Ginberg, 2002), which Astin and Astin (2000) describe as a leadership style that includes "principles of a transformative leadership" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 7).

Bogotch (2002) contends that social justice leadership cannot be separate from the work that we do as educational leaders. As such, I am keenly aware that it is an essential part of my leadership and that it speaks to my core values. Leaders who advocate for social justice expose inequities faced by marginalized groups and work to ensure that those who are excluded benefit from their efforts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In this case, the inequities which I sought to expose were embedded within our high school's structures and practices, and in particular, the AP program. As a social justice leader, it was important for me to include students in this study, as I examined the obstacles to access and opportunities that exist at Ford High. As such, my intent was to have an impact on how the learning environment will be constructed at Ford, in the future, so that all students would have opportunities to thrive. In doing so, before embarking upon this work, I needed to confront my conviction regarding this issue and ask myself the difficult question of whether I was willing to illuminate the challenges faced by the study participants and deal with the responses from faculty and school leaders, good, bad, and indifferent. I was.

Since the beginning of my tenure as an assistant principal at Ford High School, I have been concerned with the achievement gap that has been a long standing issue in the school district. My concern propelled me to create change, and my sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996) was the catalyst for the creation of the MAC Scholars program. Five teachers and I committed to developing and executing the program.

In order to focus on the process, I implemented Kotter's eight steps of change (Kotter, 1996). District data outlining the racial achievement gap created a sense of urgency among students, our guiding coalition, and other stakeholders. Our vision for MAC was that it would serve as a gap closing program for the students of Ford High School and, by extension, would produce confident, efficacious students are were secure in their intellect and who would thrive in AP classrooms. The vision was communicated to the participants, their parents, school faculty, and district leadership in a series of meetings and at a special induction ceremony. We then began the work of creating an environment in which students would understand the importance of internalizing the vision, as it was critical that they were as invested in the program as the adults who were supporting them. We hoped that that our initial plan would create a clear vision, clarify the direction for change, motivate people to act, and help to coordinate the way in which people acted as they moved the vision forward (Kotter, 1996). It was our vision that resulted in the birth of our program one year ago, but its inception was not without challenges. Through it all, however, the goal to close the gap remained clear, and our work was anchored in moral, transformational leadership (Burns, 1978). Quick wins were acknowledged when student leaders were tasked with organizing and execute monthly student meetings were able to successfully complete these tasks. Additionally, many

students saw grade increases and disciplinary issues quickly decreased. It became clear that there was pride associated with being a "MAC."

The establishment of MAC was a cultural change at Ford High School. For many years, the gap had existed without any substantive attempts to make change the status quo. Kotter (2007) refers to change initiatives as being "complex, dynamic, messy and scary" (p. 25), and our implementation was all of the aforementioned. As the leader of the program, I sought to change the status quo through "simple, linear, analytical processes" (Kotter, 2007, p. 25). Not surprisingly, as we moved through the school year, the sustainability of the program came into question (Kotter, 2007), and cracks began to appear in the foundation; this served as evidence that the structure needed to be reinforced, because like so many leaders, I had relied too heavily on simple, linear processes, a consequence of my own leadership training, whereby I "…been taught to manage, but not to lead" (Kotter, 2007, p. 25).

In order to maintain the integrity of the program, it was critical for me to master leadership skills and focus on leading, not managing. Thus, with the collaboration of the MAC advisors, an infrastructure was created. Structured study halls were piloted this school year, in an effort to increase the amount of contact time that advisors spent with advisees, and will be included in the program's infrastructure next year. Daily activities are scheduled with students that include peer mentoring, mandatory conferences with subject teachers, and weekly journaling.

When I embarked upon this journey, students were excited about the creation of the new village that was to become the M.A.C. Scholars program, and for the students who became the subjects of the study, the opportunity to tell their stories freely and

openly was liberating. M.A.C. gave students a means of support, taught them how to advocate for themselves, and has evolved into a microcosm of a community within the one hundred year old walls of Ford High.

I believe that this program has the potential to alter the way in which people perceive minority students at Ford. Closing the gap was our overarching goal and at the heart of our school reform (Fullan, 2007). This, for those involved in creating the program, was a simple decision, as our goal and mission also mirrored one of the goals outlined in the high school's strategic plan which called for us to increase the number of Black students enrolled in AP courses.

Through my continued leadership, I hope that the tracking system will be reduced and that other inequitable practices and barriers in our district, which prevent students from accessing the AP program, will be removed. As I continue to encourage our Scholars, I believe that CRT has to be the lens through which I analyze the counter stories of our students, and I am hopeful that this study will lead to the creation of welcoming learning spaces for Ford students. It is incumbent upon me to champion change, so that students are provided with opportunities that will enhance their life chances, because as I have come to understand throughout this process, this study serves no purpose unless change follows.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was to use qualitative research methods to identify the factors that lead to the underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program. Given the dearth of literature regarding these types of students, I felt an urgency to ensure that their stories were made available to others by cementing their words within

the pages of this study. They were eager to tell their stories, and so at the heart of this study were several questions, which provided me, the researcher, with a way to enter their worlds.

During our discussions, students shared how they navigated race and equity barriers at Ford High School. Within their learning spaces, they have faced roadblocks and moments when the challenges seemed insurmountable, but they persisted. For those students who have never enrolled in an AP course, because Honors was "comfortable," ideally, this study could serve to encourage students to be bold and confident in their academic decisions, and strong in their self concept, because the research is clear that rigorous courses taken in high school can provide the foundation for, not only college access, but more importantly, a college degree.

As the district moves forward with the implementation of gap closing initiatives, my hope is that as people and attitudes change, all of the barriers and impediments to learning, both seen and unseen, in particular the tracking system, will be removed. A contextual understanding of the factors that influence students to enroll, or not to enroll in AP, can be beneficial to educators, as they address the phenomenon of the racial achievement gap and work towards closing other gaps such as the information gap, access gap, racial gap, and opportunity gap, all which have the potential to negatively impact educational choices and trajectories of Black students.

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Appendix A

Black Student AP Course Enrollment

SUBJECT	PERCENTAGE OF BLACK STUDENTS ENROLLED IN AP
AP Art History	5%
AP Chemistry	9%
AP European History	4%
AP Language and Composition	17%
AP Calculus	15%
AP French Language	61%

Student Interview Protocol Students Enrolled in AP

You are here to answer questions about your experiences at [Ford] High School. There are no right or wrong answers. Try to answer the questions to the best of your ability. This is a research study, and you may opt to stop participating at any time. We will apply all of the rules and regulations that were outlined in your "Parent Permission Letter" and the "Child Consent Form". This is a voluntary study. If you choose not to participate in the study, it will not have a negative impact on you as a student here at [Ford] High School or as a member of the MAC Scholars program. This interview will be taped using a digital audio recorder. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time, just inform the interviewer. You do not have to answer all of the questions.

1. How do you define success?

2. How has the MAC Scholars program affected you as a student? Tell me about your experiences as a M.A.C. Scholar?

3. Why did you choose to enroll in AP courses?

4. What have been your most important academic accomplishments?

5. What role have your parents played in the decisions that you have made regarding your education?

6. What would you say to your peers who are qualified to enroll in AP courses, but choose not to participate?

7. How has being Black played a role in your school success?

8. If you could share a message with your most influential AP teacher, what would you say to him/her?

9. If you could share a message with your least influential AP teacher, what would you say to him/her?

10. If you could share a message with other teachers or with administrators about AP courses, what would you tell them?

11. Have you ever dropped out of an AP course? Why?

Student Interview Protocol Students Not Enrolled in AP

You are here to answer questions about your experiences at [Ford] High School. There are no right or wrong answers. Try to answer the questions to the best of your ability. This is a research study and you may opt to stop participating at any time. We will apply all of the rules and regulations that were outlined in your "Parent Permission Letter" and the "Child Consent Form". This is a voluntary study. If you choose not to participate in the study, it will not have a negative impact on you as a student here at [Ford] High School or as a member of the MAC Scholars program. This interview will be taped using a digital audio recorder. If you feel comfortable answering a question at any time, just inform the interviewer. You do not have to answer all of the questions.

1. What do you know about the AP program?

2. Have you ever considered enrolling in AP courses? Why did you choose not to enroll?

3. Tell me about your college plans.

4. Tell me about your career aspirations?

5. What are your thoughts about your peers who are enrolled in AP courses?

6. Discuss any similarities and/or differences (as you see them) that exist between you and your Black peers who enroll in AP classes and between you and your Caucasian peers.

7. How/In what ways are grades important to you?

8. What are some of the academic challenges you have faced as a Ford High School Student?

9. If you could share a message with teachers or administrators about AP courses, what would you tell them?

Appendix D

Focus Group Interview Protocol Students Enrolled in AP

You are here to answer questions about your experiences at [Ford] High School. There are no right or wrong answers. Try to answer the questions to the best of your ability. This is a research study and you may opt to stop participating at any time. We will apply all of the rules and regulations that were outlined in your "Parent Permission Letter" and the "Child Consent Form". This is a voluntary study. If you choose not to participate in the study, it will not have a negative impact on you as a student here at [Ford] High School or as a member of the MAC Scholars program. This interview will be taped using a digital audio recorder. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time, just inform the interviewer. You do not have to answer all of the questions.

1. How do you feel when you are one of a small number of Black students in your AP courses? How does it impact your performance or confidence?

2. What are your thoughts about your peers who have the intelligence to enroll in Honors and AP courses, but choose not to?

3. Discuss any similarities and/or differences (as you see them) that exist between you and your Black peers who do not enroll in AP classes and between you and your Caucasian peers who are also enrolled in AP courses.

4. How/In what ways are grades important to you.

5. What are some of the challenges that you have faced as a Ford High School student?

Appendix E

Focus Group Interview Protocol Students Not Enrolled in AP

> You are here to answer questions about your experiences at [Ford] High School. There are no right or wrong answers. Try to answer the questions to the best of your ability. This is a research study and you may opt to stop participating at any time. We will apply all of the rules and regulations that were outlined in your "Parent Permission Letter" and the "Child Consent Form". This is a voluntary study. If you choose not to participate in the study, it will not have a negative impact on you as a student here at [Ford] High School or as a member of the MAC Scholars program. This interview will be taped using a digital audio recorder. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time, just inform the interviewer. You do not have to answer all of the questions.

1. What do you know about the AP program?

2. Have you ever considered enrolling in AP courses? Why did you choose not to enroll?

3. Tell me about your college plans?

4. Tell me about your career aspirations?

5. What are your thoughts about your peers who are enrolled in AP courses?

6. Discuss any similarities and/or differences (as you see them) that exist between you and your Black peers who enroll in AP classes and between you and your Caucasian peers.

7. How/In what ways are grades important to you?

8. What are some academic challenges you have faced as a Ford High School student?

Appendix F

Parent Letter of Consent

17 Parkwood Ave. Mapleton, New Jersey 07046   (908) 555- 5600 ext. 1022

Dr. Linda Litt
Principal

November 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership through Rhodes University and have elected to examine the issue of the underrepresentation of Black students in the Advanced Placement program at Ford High School. According to studies, Black high school students are significantly underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses that prepare students for college and serve as early an early predictor of college persistence. Studies further suggest that although minority students' access to high-quality education and achievement has improved over the past few decades, the racial achievement gap continues to exist. Closing the racial achievement gap and ensuring that all students are exposed to high levels of rigor has become a top priority in education policy, however, this is difficult to attain when Black students are being left out of the AP program in large numbers. To address this pervasive issue, it is important to ascertain the factors that have led to the underrepresentation of Black students in this program.

The purpose of this study is twofold. The first goal is to explore the recruitment policies and practices at Ford High School that may impact the enrollment of Black students in the Advanced Placement program. The second goal of the study is to learn about the experiences of the participants who were enrolled in AP courses, as well as those who choose not to participate in this program (members of the MAC Scholars program). This study will examine how these factors are linked to the enrollment of Black students and will reveal the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority students enrolled in AP courses.

I will be in contact with all participants to arrange interviews. Some of the interviews will be in a group format, while others will be conducted individually. A digital audio recorder will be used. Please be advised that anonymity is guaranteed throughout this study, and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of all of the students who participate. Approximately 14 students who are members of the M.A.C. Scholars program will be interviewed.

During the interviews, your child may stop at any time, and for any reason, without penalty. Students will not be penalized if they choose not to participate in the study. If you do not agree to have your child participate, it will not have a negative impact on your child, the high school, or the MAC Scholars program.

Should you have any questions, please contact me. Thank you for your anticipated support with this important work.

Sincerely,

Faith Louis
Assistant Principal

_____ My child may participate in this study.

_____ My child may not participate in this study.

_____ My child may be digitally recorded during this study.

Student Name_____ (Please print)

Parent/Guardian signature_____

C:

Mr. James Mend, Assistant Superintendent

Dr. Linda Litt, Principal

Principal Investigator

Faith Louis

17 Parkwood Ave.

Mapleton, NJ 07046

908 555-5600

Email flouis@tnysd.k12.nj.us

Faculty Sponsor

Dr. Beth Marie Wallace

Rhodes University

Office 3036

Phone 851 256-4706

Email Wallace@rhodes.edu

Appendix G

Child Consent Form

AN ANALYSIS OF THE UNDERREPRESENTATON OF BLACK STUDENTS IN
THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAM: IMPLICATIONS FOR
POSTSECONDARY ACCESS AND COMPLETION

1. My name is Faith L. Louis, Assistant Principal at Ford High School in Mapleton, New Jersey.

2. We are asking you to take part in this study because we are trying to learn more about the factors which lead to the underrepresentation of Black students in the AP program and how this phenomenon impacts college access.

3. If you agree to participate in this study, it will be an opportunity for Black students to participate in a discussion about this critical issue.

4. There are no perceived risks in this study. You will be granted anonymity throughout the entire study.

5. This is an opportunity for your voice to be heard regarding your experiences in the Advanced Placement program.

6. Please discuss this with your parents/guardians before you make a decision about whether or not to participate. We will ask your parents for their permission to allow you to participate in this study. If your parents agree, you may still choose to opt out of this study

7. If you prefer not to participate in this study, you do not have to participate. Your involvement in this study is your decision. This study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you decide not to participate. It will not have a negative impact on your involvement in the MAC Scholars program.

8. If you have any questions about this study, you may call me @ 908 555-5600 ext 1022.

9. Signing your name below means that you agree to be in this study. You and your parents/guardians will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

_____

Name of Participant

_____ I agree to be digitally recorded during this study.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Name of Investigator

_____   _____

Signature of Investigator   Date

Faculty Sponsor

Dr. Beth Marie Wallace

Rhodes University

Office 3036

Phone 856 256-4706

Email Wallace@rhodes.edu

Appendix H

District Approval to Conduct Study

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF ███████████████████
PUBLIC BOARD MEETING
April 23, 2012

FOR ACTION

RESOLUTION NUMBER 2883

SUBJECT   **Approve Research by a Doctoral Candidate**

BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Board of Education approves a research project by a staff member pursuing a doctorate in Ed Leadership at ████████ University. Her project will focus on school factors which lead to the underrepresentation of Black students in the Advanced Placement program, with a specific emphasis on recruitment and retention.

Background Information

Pursuant to Board Policy 3245, all educational research by teaching staff members must be approved in advance by the Board