

Summer 2019

“More Luggage”: The Heavy but Invisible Social Burden Carried by African American Advanced Placement Students

Leslie C. Richard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richard, L. C.(2019). *“More Luggage”: The Heavy but Invisible Social Burden Carried by African American Advanced Placement Students*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/5437>

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

“MORE LUGGAGE”: THE HEAVY BUT INVISIBLE SOCIAL BURDEN
CARRIED BY AFRICAN AMERICAN ADVANCED PLACEMENT
STUDENTS

by

Leslie C. Richard

Bachelor of Arts
Wofford College, 1992

Master of Education
Converse College, 1993

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education in

Curriculum and Instruction

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2019

Accepted by:

Christopher Bogiages, Major Professor

Gloria Boutte, Committee Member

Rhonda Jeffries, Committee Member

Todd Lilly, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Leslie C. Richard, 2019
All Rights Reserved.

Dedication

To the four young women whose voices are the heartbeat of this study and the written work that has resulted from it—Erica, Kim, Sarah, and Kristen (all pseudonyms), I dedicate this dissertation to you for your strength, resilience, and beauty. Thank you for sharing your stories, for trusting me with them, and for teaching me more than I could ever teach you.

And to the four women, former students from many years ago, who lend their real first names to the anonymous student participants—the real Erica, Kim, Sarah, and Kristen—thank you for the lessons you taught me and for starting me on this journey. I am forever indebted to all of you.

Acknowledgements

Throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have received the support and encouragement of many people, without whom I could not have completed this process. I would first like to thank my dissertation advisor, Dr. Christopher Bogiages for his expertise and guidance. His collaboration and commitment have been invaluable from beginning to end.

I would also like to acknowledge my amazing colleagues at Glenbrook High School [pseudonym], whose friendship and support propelled me forward each day. They are shining examples of professionalism, commitment to students, and collegiality at its finest.

Most of all, to my dearest friend and most dedicated supporter, my husband Craig Richard, I wish to express my deepest, most heartfelt gratitude for your patience, encouragement, and love. Much of what I have learned about fairness, justice, and compassion have come from knowing and loving you. I would not be in this place in my life if it were not for your amazing influence.

Abstract

The purpose of this investigative action research study was to find new ways to disrupt the inequitable recruitment and enrollment practices in the sequence of AP English courses at a small, urban high school in the southeast United States. Through engagement in practitioner inquiry and guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT), this study sought to gather knowledge from the stories told by African American students about their choice to enroll in AP English and their experiences with their classmates, teachers, and the social environment in the course. Their counternarratives are juxtaposed against the limited perspectives of four White, female AP English teachers. By abandoning previous thinking about the problem and prioritizing the stories and voices of the students, this study revealed what teachers had overlooked: Black students' participation in AP has been limited and diminished because of institutionalized racism in the form of microaggressions, isolation, and other social burdens. Despite the racism they face, the students in this study have thrived in AP classes by demonstrating resilience, determination, and a commitment to "opening doors" for other students. These findings and their implications for teachers, school administrators, and district office personnel are discussed in the form of an implementation plan designed to address the inequitable practices to which these students have been subjected.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Abstract	vi
A Walk in Our Shoes	1
Chapter 1 Minority Underrepresentation in Advanced Placement English Classes	3
Introduction	3
Problem of Practice (PoP) Statement	7
Theoretical Framework	9
Research Questions	13
Researcher Positionality	14
Research Design	16
The Significance of the Study	18
Limitations of the Study	21
Organization of the Dissertation	22
Key Words/Glossary	24
Chapter 2 A Review of Relevant Literature Based in Critical Race Theory	26
Overview of Literature	29

Method of Collecting and Classifying Literature for this Review	32
Theoretical Framework	34
Historical Injustices Toward Students of Color	38
Educator Attitudes that Impact African American Student Success.....	42
Responses and Attitudes of African American Students	46
Determining Factors for High-Achieving African American Students	48
Effect of the Academic Environment on Achievement and Racial Identity	50
The Role of Literature in Shaping Academic Environment.....	53
Racial Climate: Its History and Impact on the Academic Environment.....	54
Issues of Enrollment and Placement of African American Students	55
Culturally Sensitive Research Performed by White Researchers	57
Conclusion.....	59
 Chapter 3 Critical Ethnography: Collective Narratives and Counternarrative	 62
Research Design and Investigation	63
Context of Setting	65
Participants	66
Quality of the Action Research Project.....	69
Data Collection Measures, Instruments and Tools.....	72
Research Procedure	73
Treatment, Processing and Analysis of Data	73
Summary	75
 Chapter 4 Heavy Social Burden: Carrying the Invisible Luggage of Racism	 76
Overview of Study	76

Inquiry Instead of Intervention.....	78
General Findings/Results from Student Interviews	79
The Teachers Weigh In and the Policy Is (finally!) Subjected to Scrutiny.....	98
Summary	115
Chapter 5 Unpacking the Luggage and Disrupting our Current System	118
The Problem is Self-Perpetuating	119
Numbers Don't Tell Stories; Only Stories Can Do That	120
Literature Is a Necessary but Problematic Approach to Diversity.....	123
A "Heavy Social Burden"—"More Luggage"	125
Fostering Resilience and Negotiating Silence.....	128
Practice Recommendations	129
Limitations of the Study	131
Recommendations for Future Research	132
Summary	133
References.....	135

A Walk in Our Shoes

... an original poem by Kristen (pseudonym)

*Have you ever been racially profiled just because you were in minority
Or does that make you feel good about yourself because you are in authority*

*Take a step in my shoes and realize
My culture will never truly be accepted in your eyes*

*Take a walk in our shoes and head over to an AP class
One where it is anticipated that I fall face first, because of my expected "sass"*

*You don't even have to take a baby step to have an epiphany
Place one foot in my shoes and you'll hate the treatment for me*

*Have you ever felt misplaced
Like before you even start, you've already come last in the race*

*Have you ever been afraid to raise your hand or speak out
Or constantly mute your mouth when your soul is screaming out*

*How about being singled out because your hair defies gravity
Or maybe even my way thinking, especially when I have my own strategy*

*I have been a victim of my own culture because Im trying to conform to you
So even to my own I will never completely be true*

*Sitting back watching your grades drop to an all time low
Because you don't want to appease the thought of being a black student who is dumb and ghetto*

*Yes I see you rechecking the work that I've done oh so meticulously
Ive proven my intelligence multiple times, and you've never had to do the same with me*

*I even hear the racial remarks not only between your peers but the teacher too
And I'm still yearning to at least be respected as if i am one of you.*

*I've tried everything, from wearing my hair straight, studying endlessly, I've tried
silencing my "blackness" too
And you still degrade me because I am a few shades darker than you*

*Am I not a part of the "no child left behind" policy that has been urged through and
through
Or can we hold on to and also stir towards another derivative of the hashtag "me too"*

*I've began to think that this concept has become a practice
Silence me, so my grades drop and thats one less black you'll have in class, sis*

*Or Maybe once you realize your racial depravity,
You'll not only sympathize, but we can bind this social cavity*

*Take a walk in our shoes and maybe we will not only become a tight knit
We will, collaborate, share and engage, creating a true fit*

Chapter 1

Minority Underrepresentation in Advanced Placement English Classes

Introduction

America's schools are in crisis, but not the sort that anyone is talking about in the media, in faculty meetings, or in professional development seminars. Plenty of educational issues regularly take the spotlight of our attention—the controversy of high-stakes testing, the tragedy of gun violence and school shootings, a serious lack of funding, and the list goes on. Among these topics that are frequently discussed and debated, there is a glaring omission, a topic so central to the experiences of our students and yet so invisible to most educators that even the most dedicated teachers raise a skeptical eyebrow when someone does finally mention it.

The picture at my school is bleak by any standard. It became all too apparent (yet again) three years ago as I proctored the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT), given to high school juniors who were taking Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and Composition. Having taken the PSAT multiple times in previous years, these students had already been identified for their current AP English course based on their 10th grade scores, but they were further required to take the PSAT a final time in their junior year for the possibility of qualifying as National Merit Scholars, a prestigious distinction not only for themselves but for the school district as well. While looking around at this group of 80 students, I

quickly realized that only *one* African American male and only *three* African American female students were in the group. Seeing these students gathered in the media center, I was confronted with a very telling visual of the lack of diversity in our school's AP English program. These students were the same ones I would teach the next school year, and barring a miraculous recruitment effort, I knew this racial imbalance would continue for another year. It is a terrifically obvious problem with our AP English program, so my misgivings were validated when a guidance counselor, also proctoring the exam said to me, "Notice anything about this group? We have 80 kids in this room, but only a handful who aren't White." I wish I could say I had more conversations with colleagues like this one, but I simply had not. We had a crisis on our hands, but few people are talking about it, much less doing anything about it. At any rate, the problem was no longer invisible to me.

At the time, African Americans represented over half of the total student body in my school, Glenbrook High School (pseudonym), so to see such a minimal presence of these students testing in an AP grouping was a serious concern. I came to learn that this situation echoes a national problem, one that continues to go unaddressed in all but only a few states. In its annual AP Report to the Nation (2014), the College Board addresses the nationwide statistics that speak to the equity gap in AP classes. In South Carolina for instance, the equity gap is significant: African American students made up 34.7% of the graduating class in 2013, but only 15.7% of AP exam takers in that same year. Only two states, Hawaii and Idaho, had eliminated this equity gap in enrollment at that time (College Board, 2014, p. 33). Geographically, this problem exists on a large scale, affecting the entire country, but it is also expansive in its duration, as it has existed for as

long as the AP program has. In addition to attending my high school as a student for three years in the late 80s, I have been teaching English at my alma mater for the past 16 years. For the duration of my experiences there, I have noticed this problem in our AP English classes, a problem that has only superficially been addressed—with no significant results.

One of these failed efforts was the creation of a new course designed to identify the needs of students who had transitioned out of the GT/AP track and wanted to re-enter the program. This solution proved problematic in that it required students essentially to take a third semester of English instruction during their sophomore year, which was viewed as more of a punishment than an opportunity. Indeed, the class was demanding, requiring extra reading and writing assignments, which were designed to help, but in the end, were a deterrent to students. The implication of that approach was also based in deficit-thinking, the suggestion being that minority students enrolled in the course needed to “catch up” to their White peers. After reflecting on this effort, I realize that the course did little to acknowledge or correct the “opportunity gaps” (Milner, 2012) that are now starkly apparent.

Along with the honors English teachers in the department, I have also tried a more informal, less structured solution, that being recruitment through teacher recommendation. I have solicited recommendations from teachers through email and personal conversations, which have sometimes resulted in students being invited to join the AP English course for the next school year. While this strategy has helped our recruitment efforts, it provides little consistency or reliability, as I have no way to be sure that my colleagues are following up in a thorough or equitable manner that would help to close opportunity gaps related to gender, race, or socioeconomic background. My

working relationship with some teachers permits open, frank conversations about the inclusion of more students of color in the program, yet I feel uncertain about the attitudes of other colleagues whose input and recommendations are vital to achieving diversity in AP English classes. Following an educational trend of including multicultural literature in the curriculum, we have also begun to add more works by black authors, purchasing hundreds of books, exploring Ted Talks to use as supplemental resources, and planning lessons that challenge students to think carefully and critically about social issues related to race. None of these efforts, however, has resulted in an increase in African American enrollment in our two AP English courses.

This issue is not unique to our school, as even the College Board itself provides the data to show both enrollment and exam pass rate deficits for students of color (College Board, 2014). Educational scholars have written about this problem a great deal, exploring the academic injustices visited on students of color when they do not have equal access to scholar programs like GT and AP courses (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; McBride-Davis, Slate, Moore, & Barnes, 2015; Iatarola, Conger, & Long, 2017; Jeong, 2009). It is a nationwide crisis, to be sure, but its particular manifestation in my school carries a singular set of circumstances and problems to be solved. If it were enough to recognize the problem and take steps to correct it, the problem would have been fixed years ago. Well-meaning as we are, the teachers at my school have failed to make significant ground in recruiting and retaining Black students to our program; thus, a qualitative study of the underlying issues informing this problem is necessary to uncover the unique factors that perpetuate a stubbornly persistent racial injustice in our academic programs at Glenbrook High School. Author Leo Tolstoy wrote, “Happy families are all

alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I believe his observation about the paradoxical relationship between universality and particularity rings true to the problem of racial discrimination in our school as well.

Problem of Practice (PoP) Statement

The underrepresentation of minority students, particularly African American students, in gifted and talented (GT) programs nationwide has been well documented (Milner, 2012). In many school districts, the GT program is the most direct route to AP classes in high school. Scholars have examined many other factors that influence this enrollment deficit, including curriculum, instructional practices, and benchmarks such as GPA and standardized tests scores that have built-in inequalities (Yosso et al., 2004, p. 17). However, the factors that are the most overlooked and misunderstood, especially by White educators, are the ones that carry the greatest impact on the participation of Black students in GT and AP programs, and many of these do not fall within the line of vision of White educators. These influences include a cultural mismatch between teachers and students (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner, 2015; Warikoo & Carter, 2009); the devaluing of African American students’ cultural capital (Tate, 1997; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Wildhagen, 2009; Baber, 2012); and unfair academic tracking practices that carry powerful, symbolic messages, ones that inhibit academic success for Black students (Corra, Carter, & Carter, 2011; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007; Warikoo & Carter, 2009).

These aspects of the learning process are not one-dimensional or isolated from one another; they are simultaneously social, academic, and even political in nature. Most importantly, when viewed from the student perspective, these factors create a toxic

learning atmosphere for students that is created by their peers and their teachers, the overt and the hidden curriculum, and influences seen and unseen by anyone unfamiliar with them. Insight into student perspectives—which frequently differ from educator perspectives in terms of age, race, culture, and generational values—must be built on a foundation of student narratives and counternarratives (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner, 2007).

These problems are far from new or original to our school. Long before the College Board studied racial inequalities in its AP program, other researchers and scholars addressed similar concerns. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) have made groundbreaking strides toward examining manifestations of institutional and structural racism in education. Much of this work has been built upon the scholarly work and writings of Derrick Bell (1987) whose book *And We Are Not Saved* serves as a seminal work in CRT. One chapter in his book, “The Chronicle of the Sacrificed Black Schoolchildren,” examines “the failure of court-mandated school desegregation to achieve educational equality” (Tate, 1997, p. 213). Many of these failures still manifest themselves in the overall educational atmosphere that informs students’ access to accelerated programs, as well as their ability to reach their potential once admitted to them.

Like most high schools that participate in the College Board’s AP program, my high school has long manifested an inequity in the enrollment of minority students in the various AP courses offered. While the school’s 2016-2017 student body was 35.6% White and 51.2% African American, the number of students taking any AP English course was 75.9% White and 18.9 % African American (according to the district

website). The percentages of other racial minorities taking AP English is similarly disproportionate, with only one Hispanic student enrolled in AP English, a mere 0.02%, compared to the 6.6% Hispanic makeup of the student body. In the 2016-17 school year, there were only three Asian students, accounting for 0.07%, enrolled in AP English, while Asian students made up 3.2% of the student body overall. The school's population combines high school students from affluent families in a neighborhood adjacent to the campus, as well as students from several housing projects across Providence County (pseudonym) with 58% of the study body receiving free or reduced lunch. While 30.3% of our students are eligible for Gifted and Talented services, only 19.3% take an AP course.

My interest in this study stemmed from twenty total years of teaching AP English, during which time I have felt continually discouraged by the number of African American students who take the course, especially as compared to the racial makeup of the overall student body.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) provides the foundational theoretical framework for this study (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Howard & Navarro, 2016). CRT “offers a proactive framework that can be used in the ongoing battle to provide equal educational access and opportunity to historically underrepresented students” (Yosso et al., 2004, p.18). The key word in this statement is “proactive” since the teacher participants in this study are well-meaning, socially conscious individuals whose good intentions and attempted interventions have been misguided and mostly unfruitful. Additional frameworks that have emerged from CRT and have further guided this study

include Richard Milner's (2012) work, which promotes a shift from achievement-oriented studies that are founded in a deficit perspective to an "*opportunity gap explanatory framework*" (p. 695) that investigates the underlying factors that lead to achievement gaps in standardized testing scores and grade point average (GPA). This paradigmatic shift marks a crucial departure from deficit thinking that significantly shaped the methodology of my own study. These authors and their work in this field represent the theories and frameworks that guided this study.

Critical race theory, an idea central to much educational research that deals with race, says that racism is a programmed element of all major institutions and systems within society, including education. While CRT initially explored racism as it functions in the legal system, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) expanded the theory to the realm of education, studying its applications to racism as it pertains to academic concerns like ability tracking, funding, and performance on standardized tests. CRT confronts racism as a prevalent, permanent factor in society that determines outcomes for people of color, both in transparent and subversive ways. This subversiveness is of particular interest to this study because it is a determining factor in the social aspects of an AP course and classroom and the reason why the root of the problem is unseen, even unimagined by White instructors.

Critical race theory places emphasis on the value of storytelling, whose importance to this study is two-fold: first, as a means to "name one's reality" for Black students who endure a difficult social and learning atmosphere in AP courses, and secondly, as a foundation for the methodology of collecting narratives and counternarratives to understand the sources of enrollment and success gaps. These

sources of inequity for students are foreign to White teachers, whose reality, CRT says, is very different, as their normalized Whiteness in society shields them from the kinds of experiences that their students are accustomed to (Milner, 2007; Milner, 2015; DiAngelo, 2018). Delgado (1989) states, “Members of outgroups should tell stories...Members of the majority race should listen to stories, of all sorts, to enrich their own reality” (p. 2439). Furthermore, we are encouraged to listen to the counterstories in order to increase our alertness to racial injustices, to enrich our understanding of a reality larger than our own, and to prepare ourselves to create better circumstances for everyone (Delgado, 1989). The counternarratives of the students in this study, juxtaposed against the opinions, teaching philosophies, and narratives of the teacher participants, illustrate well the power of storytelling, whose centrality to CRT holds an immediate and powerful application to this inquiry.

An important paradigm distinction lies in the theoretical framework of this study. Ladson-Billings (2006) draws an important distinction between “deficit” and “debt” that strongly parallels the current situation for African American students in today’s schools. A “deficit” refers to what one owes at the end of a period of time, such as a fiscal year, while “debt” refers to the cumulative amount owed over time (Ladson-Billings, 2006). A deficit-thinking approach to an “achievement gap” between Black and White students typically focuses on the results of a single test with the testing cycle coinciding with an academic year (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012), thus ignoring the losses over time (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Building on this relationship, Ladson-Billings (2006) states, “We do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt” (p. 5). Milner (2012) refers to the educational debt as an “opportunity gaps” framework, an analytical

framework that includes five different yet interrelated areas: color blindness, cultural conflicts, myth of meritocracy, deficit mindsets, and context-neutral mindsets. While all of these factors carry great weight, one that profoundly affects this study is the context-neutral mindset (Milner, 2012). The culture of a school or community can significantly determine outcomes for students, and refusing to factor the culture and context of a classroom or school into so-called achievement gaps is dangerous and unfair (Milner, 2012).

For instance, the high school that is the focus of this study has a high poverty index, with 57% of its students receiving free or reduced lunch (ProPublica.org). High-poverty school settings are likely to have more novice teachers, a higher teacher absentee rate, higher turnover rate among the faculty, and fewer resources for students and teachers (Milner, 2012). However, this particular high school also presents as having greater than average opportunities with 24 different AP courses offered and 19% of the student body taking at least one AP course (ProPublica.org). Milner's (2012) opportunity gaps might not seem applicable here until you realize that only 12% of the school's AP student population (256 students total) is Black while the student body is 52% Black, making a White student nine times more likely to be enrolled in an AP course at our school (ProPublica.org). ProPublica (2017), whose data comes from the Office of Civil Rights, reports this data on a page dedicated to the school under the subheading "Racial Divide" and appropriately labeled "Opportunity." This language—phrases like "opportunity gap," "education debt," and "racial divide"—are commonplace in scholarly literature and educational research, but rarely (if ever) heard in faculty meetings, professional development sessions, or informal conversations among groups of teachers.

Thus, the opportunity gap framework for this study is crucial to uncovering the missing pieces to the puzzle of low enrollment in AP courses.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to disrupt the inequitable enrollment practices in AP English courses at my high school by abandoning previous thinking about this problem, looking away from standardized test data and lists of works to be taught, and favoring the stories and voices of Black students themselves. Foregoing any more interventions until a new perspective of the problem is reached, the investigation uncovered previously unaccessed knowledge through the systematic collection and analysis of data in the form of students' stories and authentic responses to questions about the choice to enroll in AP English, as well as their experiences with their classmates, teachers, content, and social/learning environment after entering the course. The three main questions addressed in this research study are:

1. What reasons do students and teachers attribute to the low enrollment of African American students in AP Literature and Language courses relative to the school African American student population?
2. What does critical race theory say about how these perceptions have shaped previous interventions pertaining to recruitment and enrollment practices?
3. How does applying CRT offer new ways of understanding this particular problem?

I selected these questions because they honor CRT by prioritizing storytelling as a means to uncover valuable knowledge and using it to expose the underlying, systematically prejudiced policies, procedures, and school culture that have severely

limited Black students' access to and success in AP classes in the English department of Glenbrook High School. By analyzing these counternarratives through the lens of CRT and comparing them to teachers' perceptions about the problem and their failed attempts to solve it, I have unearthed the flaws of a "doing-the-best-we-can" approach of a group of White teachers to reveal that the deficits we need to address do not lie with our Black students; the deficits are entirely our own.

Researcher Positionality

My ongoing interest in shaping a more equitable, inclusive AP program is somewhat offset by my problematic positionality in the research study. I am a White, heterosexual female, born and raised in the Southeast. I have lived in a relatively small, very conservative city since I was six-years-old. I attended two small, private, predominantly White colleges in my hometown for my bachelor's and master's degrees. I also teach at my alma mater, and my own daughter attended the same high school. As a parent of a recent graduate, I am also known to many of my students as a classmate's parent.

Balancing those factors are some personal circumstances that open a window of understanding into issues facing minority students. My husband of 14 years is African American, as are most of my extended family and friends. While I acknowledge that my own experiences with discrimination are relatively minor and that I benefit daily from White privilege, I am nonetheless familiar with rejection, mistreatment, and exclusion because of racism. My husband and I sent our daughter, who is White, to a predominantly African American junior high school, even though school choice would have allowed us to send her to a predominantly White school instead. Having navigated these majority-

minority settings and situations as a parent, as well as many of my own personal experiences, I have had *some* insight into personal and student issues that arise because of race. While my understanding is and always will be limited, I have a stronger sensitivity than I might otherwise have had.

Like Herr and Anderson (2005), who discuss positionality as a continuum (p. 29), Mercer (2007) also views insiderness and outsiderness in this model, with added dimensions. Considering my own complex role relative to my study participants, I am a combination of the “outsider within” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 30) and the “external-insider” (Banks, 1998, p. 8), one who has been “adopted” into the group central to the study. While some might consider my positionality to constitute a “mismatch” between the students I studied and myself (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013, p. 249), a culturally sensitive approach to research into racial inequities in my program helped to mitigate some of these differences. Successful research from this positionality is not without precedent. Thomas Pettigrew, who was a researcher, activist, and scholar of race relations in the mid-20th century, was instrumental in desegregation research and became a powerful voice for school integration. Pettigrew was White, but advocated for positive race relations from childhood, mainly because of his relationship with his African American housekeeper, Mildred Adams, a woman he apparently viewed more as a mother than as domestic help (Banks, 1998, p. 12). Castagno (2013) has also successfully studied racial inequity as a White researcher, a positionality she says she is able to leverage by studying “institutions and Whiteness broadly speaking” (A. Castagno, personal communication, March 18, 2019).

Research Design

Since all previous, failed attempts to deal with this problem focused almost exclusively on quantitative data, a qualitative approach seemed to be the most logical, appropriate consideration for a fresh attempt at addressing this problem. Qualitative research is also fitting here in that it is best suited to study social phenomena, like the ones that underlie a Black student's experiences in a predominantly White classroom, because these phenomena defy study or representation by numerical data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As an educator studying a problem that lies within her own purview, I chose to conduct an action research study, thus capitalizing on my own unique perspective to facilitate change (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Herr & Anderson, 2015). The application of one specific type of action research, practitioner inquiry, proved especially relevant since I used an emic perspective in my own professional setting to reflect on and study my own practice in order to grow professionally, effect meaningful program changes, and advocate for educational reform (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003; Dana, 2013; Dana & Hoppey, 2014). The "inquiry cycle" includes stages such as "develop a wondering," "collect data," and "analyze data" that constitute an investigation to *lead* to action, as opposed to *taking* an action (intervention) and observing its results (Dana, 2013). After several failed interventions, informal though they were, I was hesitant, even unwilling, to try another intervention without first conducting an investigation and uncovering new knowledge to inform it. Ladson-Billings (1999) argued some two decades ago for the legitimacy of stories as "narrative inquiry in the study of teaching" (p. 214), so it should be no surprise that the foundational strength of this study rests in those stories. Other proponents of CRT also prioritize storytelling, not merely for its

value as research methodology, but for its ability to place power and agency back in the hands of oppressed people (Freire, 1970; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1999). By removing the focus of this study from the programs, policies, and educators who have perpetuated the problem and centering it on the students who have been marginalized, silenced, and disadvantaged, I designed the study as a critical ethnography that captures the power of storytelling with the theoretical underpinnings of critical studies.

Initial data were collected through individual student interviews with African American students who were currently enrolled in AP English. These interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and examined with a CRT lens. Policy documents and artifacts proved nearly impossible to locate or to exist at all in a formal sense, so policy related to the AP program had to be reconstructed from focus group interviews, memory, and previous years' student rosters. Focus group interviews were conducted with teachers who directly impact the program. Transcripts of these interviews became part of the body of field notes, including codified responses. Once the focus group of educators had shared their perspectives, I shared summary statements of the student interviews to bring all of the perspectives together for this group to reflect on and respond to. By bringing the data cycle full circle and by beginning and ending with the voices of African American AP students, the CRT framework informed the entire research process from start to finish.

Student participants were selected from the current AP enrollment. As they had worked with me as their AP English instructor, a good rapport already existed and produced authentic responses. To the credit of each young woman who participated, they were generous with their time, candid with their responses, and unbelievably wise in their

own assessments of the experiences they have had. As a teacher, I remind myself daily of the immeasurable value of good relationships with students; as a researcher, I witnessed how these relationships became resources for knowledge when I trusted students to talk to me about race, and they trusted me to listen.

While the students were eager to share their stories and insights with me, their enthusiasm and willingness to participate and discuss were in sharp contrast to the discomfort and reluctance of some of the adults in the study. Adult participants were chosen based on their role in the school relative to the AP program, but also in a way that reflected diversity within the faculty. Both White and African American teachers were included in the focus group interview. Additionally, the teachers who participated reflected both AP and Honors English teachers in order to capture the perspective of teachers who are most likely to teach African American students who choose not to take AP English.

The Significance of the Study

As it pertains to my area of research interest, action research is applicable to both the student population I studied and to the type of questions I explored. Herr and Anderson (2005) describe how the pioneer work of Paulo Freire (1970), author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, laid the groundwork for “*thematic research* projects” with “*generative themes*, or issues of vital importance to community members ... used as a basis for literacy instruction” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 15). Herr and Anderson (2005) discuss Habermas’s Knowledge Interests, including “*emancipatory* interest,” whose goal is to subject organizational structures to a critical lens that will ultimately lead to a transformation of an organization’s (often subtle) limitations on some or all its

participants (p. 27). The transformative potential of the study that I conducted qualifies it as action research intended to improve the instructional choices and practices that impact all students, particularly students of color.

Efron and Ravid (2013) characterize action research, among other things, as constructivist, situational, and practical (p. 7). Given the context I have described above, these descriptors capture my research topic well. I have self-identified an issue of utmost concern to me and immeasurable consequence to the student population of my school. While the College Board has documented a nationwide, systemic problem within the larger AP program, it is nonetheless a local problem at my high school as well. The College Board has produced nationwide data that factually report the lack of diversity in AP classes, but my own informal data collection also constituted the beginnings of an inquiry that speaks to the constructivist nature of the action research I later performed to determine practical solutions to problems of practice that may create, or at least contribute to, an existing problem.

As an action research study, this research is unlikely to be generalizable, but it has had a direct and immediate impact on Glenbrook High School. Our recruitment process for selecting AP English students clearly warrants serious examination. At the end of this study, I am inclined to believe that the best course of action is to reassess the entire tracking process in the school district, disassemble it entirely, and create a new, multidimensional process for guiding students' academic choices in an equitable, personal, and contextually complete manner.

Another impact of this study, while certainly not one of its goals, is that by simply conducting the study, an undercurrent of discomfort and anxiety has surfaced. While

everyone who spoke to me about the study claimed to fully support its purpose, those same individuals often spoke to me about the nervousness I was generating, even at the highest levels of administration. Purportedly, my name and rumors of this study were whispered in the hallways of the district office, and I have personal knowledge of emails between district office personnel and my building administrators. I was told directly that race is a “touchy, very touchy” subject, and while I was led to believe that the principals who work most closely with me trust me and my professionalism, I was made subtly, yet undoubtedly aware that there was uncertainty, discomfort, and perhaps suspicion about the study in general. I was denied access to data, required to sit in meetings with administrators, and “warned” by those who say they support my research—all reasons to believe that I have uncovered some important truths about my school, or at least begun a conversation about race at my high school that many people are afraid to have.

If a broader application of this study were possible, it would likely be in the realm of College Board sponsored professional development workshops for AP teachers in the annual Fall workshops or in their “Dream Deferred Annual Conference” in the Spring. The decade-long focus on “equity and access” in the AP program nationwide aligns with CRT in that it acknowledges the existence and elusiveness of underlying racism that systematically prevents minority students from participating in and achieving in AP classes of all subjects. Thus, it makes sense that they would share an interest in a culturally sensitive action research study that might transfer into strategies to rectify some of these issues.

Limitations of the Study

Given the complexity of studying race in any setting, particularly education, several potential pitfalls exist. Some of those pertain to my own limitations as a White female researcher studying African American students and their emotional, subjective responses to a course that has traditionally underserved them. Even with an intentionally diverse participant group, authentic responses may not have truly been possible because of what Haddix & Price-Dennis (2013) describe a “mismatch” between instructor and student participants (p. 249); in fact, every teacher in the English department who teaches students who are on track to take AP, including the four AP English teachers, and all but one of the feeder teachers, is a White female. A small number of AP seniors have studied under a Black male instructor in Honors English. The influence of studying literature with White female instructors for so long is immeasurable, yet undeniably important to the quality of multicultural education they have (or have *not*, as is most likely the case) received.

Additionally, by ignoring socio-economic issues, I may miss the ways in which those issues become blended with responses received from both White and Black students alike. In a school with a very high poverty index, the likelihood that the AP program also discourages or disenfranchises students of lower socioeconomic groups is extremely probable.

Finally, in pre-study meetings and interviews, I discovered some of the complexities of discussing race in education. Fellow educators often took a defensive stance or hedged their responses to avoid perceived blame or judgment. The discomfort that my White colleagues felt was clear, and I often heard (from second-hand sources of

course) that people were “getting nervous” or my study was “being discussed” among White colleagues, most of them holding administrative positions. Because race is such a carefully avoided topic, I was initially concerned that students would withhold authentic responses because they had received unfavorable responses in the past, such as dismissive attitudes from faculty and fellow students. While I can never be sure how much information or personal responses were withheld, the narratives that these young students shared are startling and powerful, full of emotion and insight that opened up new ways of understanding the problem of practice that I had never considered before. In the end, I count this as a partial limitation, an unknown quantity, and an opportunity to learn even more than I did while conducting this study. In fact, some of the students interviewed have since shared that they thought of more that they should have told me, and I have welcomed the opportunity to speak with them again. The only limitation in this regard is time, but the conversations will continue even after the writing is completed.

Organization of the Dissertation

What follows is a summary of the data to be collected. Highlights from the individual interviews with teachers and focus groups conversations will be discussed and analyzed, especially as these relate to previous interventions and proposed interventions for the future.

This action research study, built on a foundation of CRT and culturally sensitive research, aims to correct a long-standing problem of practice in the AP English program at Glenbrook High School (pseudonym): the discrepancy between the percentage of African American students who take the course, and the much larger percentage of

African American students in the overall study body. The study scrutinized the role that department, school, and district-wide practices play in creating this discrepancy. The goal of the study was to determine how teacher attitudes and perceptions, primarily as those compared to student perspectives and insights, might shape enrollment practices to provide an inclusive, culturally sensitive program.

While our current curricular and instructional practices may be deterrents to students taking AP English, the goal is a program that equally appeals to students of all races. While the instructors in AP English represent a “mismatch” between teachers and our minority students, our hope is to move beyond myths of “color blindness” and meritocracy (Milner, 2012, pp. 699, 704) to provide more and better opportunities for African American students with the belief that these will translate into greater student achievement, a more complete literary education, and an improved sense of well-being on the part of all students.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation, entitled “A Review of Relevant Literature Based in Critical Race Theory,” explores scholarly research based in CRT and the historical context of the problem of practice, particularly the failings of *Brown v. Board of Education*. It also summarizes some important concepts related to the gaps in perspectives between teachers and students, including color blindness, cultural capital, stereotype threat, and deficit thinking. Finally, this chapter presents some key factors to Black student achievement, including racial identity and resilience.

Chapter 3, “A Critical Ethnography: Collecting Narratives and Counternarratives,” provides an overview of the research design, including the

application of action research and practitioner inquiry; a description of the context of the study, its setting, and the participants; and the method of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4, entitled “A Heavy Social Burden: Carrying the Invisible Luggage of Racism,” presents the key findings from the collected stories of four African American, female students in AP English. The recurring issues and themes among the stories they shared in their individual interviews are presented and discussed. Then the data collected from four teachers are shared, and most importantly analyzed in comparison to the student perspectives and against the backdrop of critical race theory.

Finally, Chapter 5, “Unpacking the Luggage and Disrupting Our Current System,” presents the conclusions from the data collection, exploring the key reasons why previous interventions have been unsuccessful and redirecting the focus of the problem from the mostly numbers-driven approach to the problem used in the past to a more socially and culturally conscious one that can inform future interventions.

Key Words/Glossary

The term **Advanced Placement** in this dissertation refers exclusively to the College Board program that offers college-level courses to high school students in 38 subjects. The course culminates in an exam administered in May each year, and a passing score on the exam (3 or higher on a scale of 1 to 5) makes students eligible for college credit, at the discretion of the college or university they attend (College Board, 2014b).

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that recognizes that racism is inherent in all social, political, and legal institutions, including education. CRT seeks to challenge existing power structures and the racial inequalities that they perpetuate (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Howard & Navarro, 2016). One of the key tenets of CRT

is the significance of storytelling in “naming one’s reality” (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Student achievement is broadly defined in this dissertation. The College Board (2014b) defines AP success as scoring a 3, 4, or 5 on the AP exam, which is scored on a scale of 1 to 5. However, in any other context, success is generalized, as I have used it to generally describe learning and progress for individual students. Any improvement to a student’s reading, writing, or speaking skills constitutes success by my personal definition.

Microaggressions refer to “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 60).

The term **stereotype threat** is a type of confirmation bias that results when a student in a minority group underperforms on a standardized test as a result of his/her awareness of the negative stereotypes held against him/her (Corra et al., 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

As a final point of clarification, I have used the terms “African American” and “Black” interchangeably in this dissertation.

Chapter 2

A Review of Relevant Literature Based in Critical Race Theory

Student participation in advanced level courses, especially the College Board sponsored Advanced Placement (AP) program, has been linked for many years to college readiness, college admissions, and college success (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; McBride-Davis, Slate, Moore, & Barnes, 2015; Iatarola, Conger, & Long, 2017; Jeong, 2009). Benefits of taking AP courses and passing their related exams include extra GPA points in high school (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2017) and an increase in acceptance to the nation's most highly selective colleges (Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012). With these obvious benefits to college-bound high school students, AP courses have enjoyed a sharp increase in participation over the years (Iatarola et al., 2017), and many states even offer incentives to both districts and instructors for increased student participation and success (McBride-Davis et al., 2015; Jeong, 2009). While overall participation in AP courses is on the rise nationwide, the number of minority students, especially African American and Hispanic students, enrolled in AP courses is still disproportionately low compared to their White peers (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007; Posselt et al., 2012).

Equal opportunity for all students is an important component of social justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). A more inclusive and culturally sensitive AP English program, established and maintained through deliberate and structured efforts, is a vital part of that process; further, reform efforts must include changes to the curriculum,

instructional styles, and attitudes of teachers and other school personnel (Banks, 1993; Milner, 2010). In an effort to close what the College Board has identified as “participation” and “success” equity gaps, it has developed and promoted an “AP Equity and Access Policy,” which “encourage[s] the elimination of barriers that restrict access to AP for students from ethnic, racial and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underserved” (College Board, 2014, *Course Guide*, copyright page). The organization has also recruited low-income and minority students to its AP program for over thirty years (Berliner & Glass, 2014). However, these efforts have failed to close the participation or success gaps for underrepresented students (College Board, 2014, *Report to the Nation*). In fact, the College Board (2014) reports that of the fifty states in which high schools participate in the AP program, a disappointing 48 have failed to close enrollment and achievement gaps. Only Hawaii and Idaho have closed the participation equity gap for African American students, defined by the percentage of African American AP exam takers compared to the percentage of African Americans in the total graduating class; only Hawaii has closed the equity gap for “success,” defined by the percentage of AP exam-takers scoring a 3 or higher on the nationally administered course exam (College Board, 2014, *Report to the Nation*, p. 33).

The high school that is the subject of this study has long mirrored these nationwide inequities in the enrollment of minority students in the various AP courses offered. Recent enrollment statistics available from the district’s website reveal the discrepancies. According to the district’s website, the school’s 2016-2017 student body was 35.6% White and 51.2% African American, yet the number of students taking any AP English course was 75.9% White and 18.9 % African American. The percentages of

other racial minorities taking AP English were similarly disproportionate, with only one Hispanic student enrolled in AP English, a mere 0.02%, compared to the 6.6% Hispanic makeup of the student body. In the 2016-17 school year, there were only three Asian students, accounting for 0.07%, enrolled in AP English, while Asian students made up 3.2% of the student body overall. The school's population combines high school students from affluent families in a neighborhood adjacent to the campus, as well as students from several housing projects across Providence County [pseudonym] with 58% of the study body receiving free or reduced lunch. While 30.3% of our students are eligible for Gifted and Talented services, only 19.3% of these students take an AP course.

A factor that makes this AP enrollment deficit even more alarming is the means by which college admissions officers evaluate the rigor of a student's academic course load. When guidance counselors send a student transcript for consideration along with the rest of an application, it is accompanied by a school profile that includes the number of AP courses offered at the school. Thus, a student's transcript is judged in part by its rigor compared to the rigor of what is offered at the school. Glenbrook High School (pseudonym) offers 24 AP courses, compared to the state average of 8.7 AP courses, so a student who does not take a single AP course may be judged more harshly than if he/she had attended a school that offers significantly fewer AP courses. For this reason, students' enrollment in AP courses carries more weight as they matriculate to college, especially if they have applied to highly selective colleges and universities.

The purpose of this study is to disrupt the inequitable enrollment practices in AP English courses at my high school by abandoning previous thinking about this problem, moving away from standardized test data and lists of works to be taught, and favoring the

stories and voices of the students themselves. Foregoing interventions until a new perspective of the problem is reached, this investigation uncovered previously untapped knowledge through the systematic collection and analysis of data in the form of students' stories and authentic responses to questions about the choice to enroll in AP English, as well as their experiences with their classmates, teachers, content, and social/learning environment after entering the course. To explore this problem of practice, the following questions will be studied:

1. What reasons do students and teachers attribute to the low enrollment of African American students in AP Literature and Language courses relative to the school African American student population?
2. What does critical race theory say about how these perceptions have shaped previous interventions pertaining to recruitment and enrollment practices?
3. How does applying CRT offer new ways of understanding this particular problem?

Overview of Literature

The existing research surrounding the inequalities associated with high-achieving African American students and educators who serve them approaches the problem from a variety of perspectives. The struggles and needs of African American high school students are well documented (Carter-Andrews, 2009; Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012) and often follow them along their academic journey to college (Noble, 2011; Baber, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Because of the personal and highly individual nature of race-based educational experiences, ethnographic approaches offer insight into the mindset of high-achieving students of color and give their stories and voices a central

role in research (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tillman, 2002; Delgado, 1989). Lending a voice to students to share their own narratives in their own words reveals important, yet abstract qualities that promote African American students' achievement: resiliency, a strong racial identity, and the value of support systems like family, church, and community (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012). Storytelling is also a central tenet of critical race theory, the theoretical framework of this study (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Referencing the work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Ladson-Billings (1999) describes the merits of storytelling, not only to capture the perspectives of African American students, but also to help teachers to “deconstruct and construct a vision of teaching that better serves all students” (p. 228). While stories are still viewed with some skepticism in mainstream research, Ladson-Billings (1999) argues that their value is not diminished by this fact, and that CRT seeks to “interject minority cultural viewpoints, derived from a common history of oppression, into their efforts to reconstruct a society crumbling under the burden of racial hegemony” (p. 215). This study has incorporated stories in this same vein, by highlighting the stories of marginalized students and examining their racialized experiences in the context of the institutional and societal racism that informs their academic and social experiences in AP classes.

As my study examines English Language Arts courses, the role of literature and multicultural studies is a determining factor in both the success of minority students and the effectiveness of educators who teach them. Scholarly literature on this subject abounds, ranging from studies about board books for toddlers to literature used in pre-service education classes that promotes greater understanding among college students

who will soon enter the profession (Glenn, 2012; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Iwai, 2013)

A review of relevant scholarly literature provides an important foundation for any action research study. Patterns that emerge among these published studies suggest avenues for future exploration. While many of the study-specific results are not generalizable, they often suggest guiding principles for similar studies. While I am not aware of a study like the one I conducted, the complex set of issues that inform my problem of practice includes elements that have been studied and discussed in different, albeit relevant, situations. Although the focus of my study includes the role of honors and AP instructors in affecting enrollment and success in high-achieving courses, an understanding of the student issues at work in this equation the beginning and end of the study, both setting the foundation for the focus group interviews with instructors and providing a perspective from which to analyze teachers' responses. After all, teaching and learning constitute a relationship, and understanding one half of this dynamic necessitates an understanding of the other half as well. Reviewing the student-centered research became an invaluable step in the process toward examining teacher behaviors and practices that have either facilitated or hindered the success of minority students in the past. Consequently, the following review of literature includes studies that examine White instructors' attitudes and approaches toward teaching Black students, as well as studies whose focus is on Black achievement and all the dynamics of it, including internal motivations and external influences.

The insight from these studies is particularly valuable for my study because of my positionality. I am a White female, born and raised in the Southeast. Balancing those

factors are some personal circumstances that open a window of understanding into issues facing minority students. My husband of twelve years is African American, as are most of my extended family and friends. While I acknowledge that my own experiences with discrimination have been relatively minor and that I benefit daily by White privilege, I am nonetheless familiar with rejection, mistreatment, and exclusion because of racism. Ketter and Lewis (2001) somewhat share my positionality and found themselves examining teacher practices at their school; however, they examined teaching of multicultural texts specifically, not policies and practices related to student placement and recommendation to higher level English classes. The other studies in this literature review are conducted mostly by African American researchers who are more likely to receive candid responses from African American colleagues and students (Henfield & Washington, 2012; Milner, 2005; Noble, 2011). Investigating their strategies and methodologies offered me valuable insight into culturally sensitive approaches to research of this kind. One prevailing conclusion is that culturally sensitive research studies must allow the students themselves to have a voice in the study through data collection strategies such as journals, focus groups, and personal interviews (Alkebulan, 2007; Baber, 2012; Fisher, 2005; Howard, 2003). Unless the information gathered focuses on the voices of minority students and teachers, the results would be of limited value. This notion, along with other theoretical concepts of culturally sensitive research, shaped my thinking about methodological approaches that I used.

Method of Collecting and Classifying Literature for this Review

To collect a body of work for study in this literature review, I consulted Jstor.org, searching for previously identified guiding ideas that I wanted to study further. One such

notion, discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, is the paradigm shift from deficit thinking, such as achievement gaps, to a framework called “opportunity gaps” (Milner, 2012). Having become aware of these two opposing models, I began to search for literature that centered on the latter because doing so prepares me to study my own practice within the context of my faculty and the structure of the school, rather than focusing on the students’ relative test scores, performance, and other outcomes. Starting from the premise that student outcomes are largely, sometimes wholly, determined by educators’ decisions (Corra, Carter, & Carter, 2011; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007), I have highlighted ways that the school and its faculty are lacking, rather than the students themselves. I also began to investigate literature that spotlights high-achieving African American students to focus my study on the determining factors of their success (Marsh et al., 2012; Carter-Andrews, 2009). In doing so, I am looking for the aspects of education that most influence student success, whether these be positive experiences and interactions, or the ability to overcome obstacles. Finally, I searched for research scenarios that paralleled my own: minority populations that are underserved by a mostly White faculty or within a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) (Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Carter-Andrews, 2009; Milner, 2005). While my school is only 35.6% White, the faculty is predominantly White and middle-class, and the PTO is almost entirely White and affluent. The stakeholders who have the most agency in the school are White, even if the majority of the population, by far, are minority students. To this end, the writings of Robin DiAngelo (2018) have influenced me greatly, as her book *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, has provided insight into the attitudes and behaviors that characterize Whiteness. Additionally, DiAngelo’s (2018)

work addresses my dilemma as a White teacher/researcher studying race: “So, though I am centering the white voice [in the writing], I am also using my insider status to challenge racism” (p. xv).

Theoretical Framework

Recent studies of the impact of race on educational outcomes are often firmly grounded in critical race theory (CRT) (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010; Glenn, 2012; Taylor & Hoehsmann, 2011; Carter-Andrews, 2009; Castagno, 2013). CRT is a framework that recognizes that racism is inherent in all social, political, and legal institutions, including education (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT seeks to challenge existing power structures and the racial inequalities that they perpetuate. While there is no specific year that marks the inception of CRT, it is believed to have developed in the 1970s as the Civil Rights Movement was on the decline (Tate, 1997). Begun as an examination of the systemic racism in the legal and court systems, CRT soon branched out to academics, much owing to the scholarly work of Derrick Bell (Tate, 1997). Both a lawyer and a later a law instructor at Harvard, Bell viewed his teaching as another application of his quest for civil rights and social justice (Tate, 1997).

The Major Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Much of the scholarly work of CRT in the field of education is also built upon the writings of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and William Tate (1997). An important tenet of CRT is the belief that racism is “endemic and deeply ingrained in American life” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 55). CRT also recognizes the “double-edge sword of civil rights legislation,” which was first believed to be the avenue by which equality could be achieved (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 56). The ambiguity of legal remedies and

their dubious results have caused critical race theorists to seek other outlets for achieving social justice, education being among the most important of these (Ladson-Billings, 2015).

An educational off-shoot of CRT, “culturally relevant pedagogy” is teaching that is inclusive of, even dependent upon, the culture and everyday experiences of all students to create meaningful connections to history, literature, and other curricula (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.56). Culturally relevant teaching embraces another of the essential beliefs of CRT: “naming one’s own reality with stories” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Giving a voice to the oppressed individual or group is believed to both empower the oppressed and enlighten the oppressor (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Stories have the potential to change people’s way of thinking, as Tate (1997) describes the relationship between the stock stories of the oppressor and the counterstories of people of color: “ Stock stories construct realities in ways that legitimize power and position” while counterstories can dispel myths, destroy harmful mindsets, and show us a path to equity (220).

A third major tenet of CRT is “interest convergence,” which refers to the cognitive dissonance of White people who agree with racial equality in theory but resist meaningful changes toward that end if it means that their positions of power and privilege may be compromised (Milner, 2007, p 391). DiAngelo (2018) describes how White people further protect themselves and their own interest in a phenomenon she calls “White Solidarity” (p. 57). Applied to this study, interest convergence presents the possibility that well-meaning faculty (and possibly White students) may agree with an

equitable, culturally sensitive AP program as an ideal, yet remain reluctant to take action to achieve it.

Critical race theorists in the field of education also examine multicultural literature as it impacts the academic success and overall well-being of students of color. Multiculturalism in education is a movement that seeks to “reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse racial, ethnic, and social-class groups will experience educational equality” (Banks, 1993, p. 3). An important element of multicultural studies is the teaching of diverse, culturally sensitive literature (Glenn, 2012; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). These studies often conclude that true multiculturalism is either difficult to find, as in the scarcity of board books that feature children of color (Hughes-Hassell & Cox, 2010), or is targeted at a White audience, often depicting children whose journey leads them to assimilate to the dominant culture (Yoon et al., 2010). Young adult fiction is sometimes marginalized because of linguistic differences, or more commonly the predominantly White student audience’s lack of familiarity with realities other than their own (Taylor & Hoechsmann, 2011). Previous interventions for my own problem of practice have focused on literary classics, appropriate for collegiate study, but selected for high school students working at the accelerated pace of an AP English course. Adding more works by African American authors has been problematic at times, in that a predominantly White audience often misunderstands, misconstrues, or outright rejects literary works that challenge the power structures that students and teachers have been conditioned to view as normal.

Cultural Capital Theory

Related to CRT is another theory about power structures in society, which is the cultural capital theory, first developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and Jean Claude Passeron. Cultural capital is “knowledge of and familiarity with the culture of the dominant class” which has effects on “a range of students’ educational outcomes” (Wildhagen, 2009, p. 175). One significant impact of Cultural capital theory in education centers on the relationships between students and teachers, who may unconsciously value students with more understanding of the social customs and behaviors of the dominant group at school—White, middle-class (Wildhagen, 2009). Lamont and Lareau (1988) also emphasize the way cultural capital, and whose cultural capital is valued, can perpetuate the “social stratification systems” already at work (p.154). One way this occurs is through increased educational goals beyond high school through a phenomenon that Wildhagen (2009) calls “self-selection,” a process by which those in the dominant culture are more likely to pursue post-secondary education and thus exert more academic effort in high school (p. 178). In other words, those students whose culture is valued reap the benefits of having their culture valued, even esteemed as superior, and they behave accordingly (Wildhagen, 2009). Taken together, CRT and cultural capital theory emphasize how existing social power structures perpetuate themselves through education, which ironically is the very system in society that could dismantle power structures and liberate the oppressed groups within it (Freire, 1970).

The literature cited thus far addresses some of the primary concerns of the current research study, but in isolation, rather than collectively. The high school and AP English program that are the subject of this study reflect several elements of the literature

presented here, but in a unique combination: African American students at the high school constitute a majority-minority, but the AP English program reflects a Predominantly White academic situation (Corra et al., 2011; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004).

Historical Injustices Toward Students of Color

Through the lens of CRT, race is “*the* central construct for understanding inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 50). Thus, it is safe to conclude that there has never been a time in the nation’s history when minority students have enjoyed equal educational resources, facilities, or opportunities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). While the landmark 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* promised to equalize educational opportunities by overturning the doctrine of “separate but equal,” the desegregation of schools in the coming years proved that the Supreme Court decision primarily changed the location of students, not their standing in receiving equal treatment (Carrol, 2017).

The Unfulfilled Promise of *Brown v Board of Education*

The failings of *Brown v Board of Education* are well documented (Nettles et al., 2003; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004; Marsh et al., 2011), yet these shortcomings are generally unknown to the masses of students, parents, and even educators. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) illustrate the irony that in a desegregated school system, African American students are “more segregated than ever before. Although African Americans represent 12 percent of the national population, they are a majority in twenty-one of the twenty-two largest (urban) school districts” (p. 55). Nettles et al. (2003) describe how residential segregation leads to educational segregation, a problem exacerbated by the difficulty of attracting qualified teachers to minority majority

schools. Furthermore, schools with high percentages of minority students typically offer fewer advanced courses, commonly thought to be the best preparation for college (Nettles et al., 2003; Corra et al., 2011).

Another unintended effect of *Brown v Board of Education* is that it resulted in the laying off and dismissal of thousands of African American educators (Carrol, 2017). While Black teachers had served as powerful role models and mentors before *Brown v Board of Education*, in the era of integration, Black students were deprived of these meaningful relationships with educators who shared their history and culture (Carrol, 2017). Some have even referred to African American instructors as “an endangered species” (Carrol, 2017, p. 116). The deceptive nature of the *Brown v Board of Education* ruling has laid a foundation of misunderstanding, one that my study will operate under, no doubt. Colleagues who operate under the misconception that all students are afforded equal opportunities and receive equal treatment may find it difficult to accept the basic premise on which my study is built: AP courses are not equally available to students of color (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). They may also misunderstand, even be offended by, the idea that *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka (1954)* may have inadvertently caused negative sociological effects for African American students, such as diminished racial identity, “acting White,” and negative perceptions of their own Blackness (Marsh et al., 2012).

Patterns of Desegregation and Resegregation

Another historical era, while it is quite recent history, is also important to the context of my study. While *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, 1954* desegregated schools—no matter how slowly that happened—by the 1990s studies showed that school

districts were beginning to be *resegregated* (Stroub & Richards, 2013). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) attribute resegregation to White flight, which produces segregated neighborhood schools. In “Gary Orfield Documents the Resegregation of America’s Public Schools,” alarming statistics reveal the extent of racial resegregation: “in 1988, 43.5 percent of black students attended majority white schools in the South. In 1996 only 34.7 percent of black students in the South attended majority white schools. This is a huge decline of more than 20 percent” (p. 48). However, in the years since 1998, “modest reintegration” has occurred in about two-thirds of the nation’s schools (Stroub & Richards, p. 509). This historical pattern, the ebb and flow of segregation and desegregation, has yet to be fully determined. Certain educational policies, like the trend toward school choice, do not have immediate effects but rather trickle down to local school districts slowly and piecemeal (Stroub & Richards, 2013). Carrol (2017) notes that in “today’s integrated and *de facto* resegregated schools” Black instructors, who were once “honored and revered” are present in much smaller numbers (p. 130). Among other things, Black instructors benefited Black students through “racial uplift,” the ability to lift the Black race through a shared history and racial pride (p.130). Despite these realizations and observations, the effects of various historical trends—be it the judicial system, educational policy, or society trends like residential patterns—have not fully been realized or understood. The mismatch between a mostly White teaching faculty and an increasingly diverse student population is a condition that affects the AP English program at the high school that is the subject of this study. Of the four English teachers who share ten sections of two different AP courses, all four of them are middle-class, White women. Milner (2012) describes this as a “mismatch”: “White teachers and

students of color have had different racial experiences both inside and outside the classroom, a gap that may create roadblocks to learning opportunities and consequently roadblocks to students' academic and social success in the classroom" (p.19). The roadblocks created at Glenbrook High School have not only blocked African American students' entrance to AP courses through recruitment practices like standardized test score cut-offs, but also through overlooking the learning environment, which can be marked by subtle (but also evident) racism like microaggressions, marginalization, and social isolation.

The Multicultural Literature Movement in Education

Finally, in terms of historical educational trends, the multicultural literature movement has had a profound effect on the treatment of African American students in public schools (Banks, 1998). Beginning as early as the mid-1970s and reaching its peak in the early 2000s, the movement to incorporate a more diverse and inclusive curriculum introduced more culturally relevant literature, but often overlooked the effects of a predominantly White institution (PWI) as a context for such a study (Castagno, 2013). Among these effects, Black students in a PWI must give special consideration to racial identity, "racial group pride," and "how race and racism operate to potentially constrain one's success" (Carter-Andrews, 2009, p. 299). Castagno (2013) further notes that a lack of ethnographic studies in the field of multicultural education has allowed educators to continue to pursue multicultural studies as an *ideal*, without having an awareness of what such a curriculum looks like in practical application in the classroom. By ignoring key issues germane to *effective*, *productive*, and *just* implementation of a multicultural education, educators have often perpetuated racial biases, and perhaps done more damage

than they would have by omitting multicultural studies altogether (Milner 2010). The Annenberg Foundation (2017), by contrast, provides a comprehensive, online multicultural workshop for teachers entitled “The Expanding Canon” whose approach includes a “Cultural Immersion” philosophy, as well as a variety of pedagogical strategies including critical pedagogy and cultural studies. More often, teachers approach multicultural literature from an “Additive Approach,” which according to Banks’ Multicultural Infusion Model merely adds works by authors of different cultures without changing the basic, normalized structure of the curriculum, which is typically Eurocentric through and through (Ford, 2013, p. 194). The learning environment in the AP classrooms at Glenbrook High School proved to be little more than “Additive,” a discovery that warrants a serious reexamination and restructuring of the current curriculum.

Educator Attitudes that Impact African American Student Success

The historical trend toward multicultural education has sometimes been problematic and counterproductive, leading to some concepts that reappear often in scholarly literature about social injustices toward African American students in education. One such concept is the notion of color-blindness, one of several educator attitudes that has a weighty impact on student outcomes (Milner, 2010; Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Colorblindness

While well-intended people often claim to be colorblind, perhaps thinking this quality means they are without prejudice, the colorblind approach in the classroom can be counterproductive, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) describe this type of erroneous

thinking as “[camouflage] for the self-interest of dominant groups in American society” (p. 52). In its belief in the sameness of all races and the universality of human experience regardless of race, color-blindness denies the very power structure and oppression that perpetuate racism (Castagno, 2013). Such an approach allows White teachers to remain in a “comfortable” realm of neutrality, but it also normalizes Whiteness (Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Castagno, 2013). Color-blindness can also lead White teachers to believe mistakenly that they are promoting diversity when in fact, they may be underscoring concepts damaging to students, like assimilation (Yoon & Haag, 2010). When students are expected to assimilate, or adopt the dominant culture of a society, they are robbed of their own racial identity and the cultural capital that they enjoy as part of that identity (Delgado, 1989; Tate, 1997).

Even more damaging is the ironic reversal that color-blindness, in its false assumption of race neutrality, promotes the equally false notion of meritocracy. If all people, regardless of race, are thought to have equal opportunities in society, the false conclusion drawn is that the White students earn (merit) their higher levels of achievement merely through hard work, and not through the benefits of White privilege (Yosso et al., 2004). In my own school, color-blindness causes teachers to treat texts with Black characters as though they are multicultural texts, even when those characters are clearly victimized by a society dominated by the White power dynamic. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for instance, is not multicultural literature and should never be taught as such. While the protagonist, Huck, and the slave Jim escape on a raft down the Mississippi River as friends, Jim’s character is a collection of several cruel stereotypes held against African Americans. Further, the book’s concluding chapters contradict

Huck's seeming enlightenment about Jim's humanity as Huck's affection for him wanes. Huck even makes a game out of the "capture" of Jim, using Jim once again as the butt of his jokes and antics. While there is some validity in arguing that Jim becomes something of a surrogate father to Huck, even this relationship, unconventional though it may be for the 1800s, does not balance the prolific use of racial epithets and racially insensitive treatment of Jim as a character. Operating under the guise of color-blindness, an educator might argue that Jim is good-hearted and loves Huck (which he does), yet that same teacher may proceed to ignore or gloss over the larger issues of slavery and injustice that frame the entire narrative. In any case, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does not meaningfully address the issues of race in American society, and should therefore not be treated as multicultural literature. A colorblind approach to instruction and student rapport, however, might easily lead one to think of this novel in that way (Milner, 2012).

In a larger sense, colorblindness promotes the false idea that Black students have the same experiences, inside and outside the classroom. DiAngelo (2018) notes that colorblindness "makes it difficult" for White people, applied here directly to teachers, "to address subconscious beliefs" about social interactions and behaviors like "internalized superiority and entitlement, perceptions, and emotions" (p. 42). This action research study revealed that all these attitudes have been part of the school lives of our African American students, yet our colorblind mindsets have kept us deeply unaware of the social mistreatment and ongoing isolation that they have endured—in AP English classrooms and throughout their school day.

Deficit-Thinking

Perhaps equally damaging, the paradigm that focuses on achievement gaps with minority students casts a shadow over student efforts by emphasizing outcomes on standardized testing and academic track placement, rather than on the complex set of factors that lead to those outcomes (Ford, Moore, & Scott, 2011). This approach is commonly referred to as “deficit thinking” because its focus is on perceived deficiencies among a sub-group of the entire student population (Milner, 2012). When deficit thinking drives curriculum and testing conversations, the attention is on measurable student performance as compared to other demographic groups who may well have hidden advantages or privileges (Nettles et al., 2006; Fisher, 2005; Marsh et al., 2012). As an alternative to this conceptual framework of test results, Milner (2012) proposes a shift from achievement-oriented studies that are founded in a deficit perspective to an “*opportunity gap explanatory framework*” (p. 695) that investigates underlying factors that lead to achievement gaps in standardized testing scores and GPA. Milner (2012) suggests that the “demographic divide” between a typically White faculty and the more diverse student body creates a disconnected curriculum (p. 700). Many current studies reject “deficit thinking” or “deficit perspective” (Glenn, 2012; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Noble, 2011). Basing much of his work on Gloria Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Milner (2012) examines the role of an “education debt” (Milner, 2012, p. 696), which is owed to students who have historically been underserved by the public-school system. In his related book *Start Where You Are, But Don’t Stay There*, Milner (2010) outlines five major concepts important to an “opportunity gap” framework: rejecting color-blindness,

mindfulness about cultural conflicts, the myth of meritocracy, the threat of low teacher expectations, and the dangers of “context neutral mindsets” (pp. 14-16).

Responses and Attitudes of African American Students

In addition to understanding the teacher mindsets mentioned thus far, an understanding of the potential attitudes and responses of African American students is a key component of culturally sensitive research and culturally relevant pedagogy (Tillman, 2002; Tate, 1997). “Acting White” is one such mind-set whose validity is often discussed and debated (Wildhagen, 2011; Ford et al., 2011). The “acting White” hypothesis claims that students of color who perform well in school and enjoy school-related activities are “negatively sanctioned by their same-race peers for acting White” (Wildhagen, 2011, p. 445). Often used as a social reason why Black students are not enrolled in more honors and advanced courses, “acting White” falsely assumes that social sanctions from one’s peers are the main deterrents to academic success (Wildhagen, 2011). While colorblindness denies that students of color are victimized by institutional racism (since everyone is thought to be the same in opportunity and treatment), “acting White” engages in victim-blaming, essentially absolving educators of responsibility by attributing achievement gaps to a social cause beyond educators’ control (Castagno, 2013; Wildhagen, 2011).

Likewise, the oppositional culture model, theorized by John Ogbu (1978) to be the cause of achievement gaps for African American students, places the onus of achievement, or the lack thereof, on Black students themselves, treating it as cultural phenomenon beyond the scope of the public-school system (Fisher, 2005). Ogbu (1978) postulated that Black students view White culture, associated closely with academic

achievement, as directly opposed to Black culture, and thus Black students intentionally avoid academic success as an act of cultural loyalty and a rejection of an educational system that does not benefit them. Noble (2011) acknowledges that “academic disidentification” (regarding academic achievement as a trait not belonging to one’s racial or cultural identity) and “oppositional identity” may be key factors in a student’s failure to achieve academically, as confidence and positive self-concept are vital influences on anyone’s success (p.189). However, oppositional culture model, while it may have historical validity, overlooks other factors that may contribute to African American achievement (Fisher, 2005). Among these is the relationship between Black students and a predominantly White teaching force; Milner (2010) describes the “racial demographic divide between teachers and students in P-12 classrooms” as a “disadvantage for teachers and students alike” (pp. 18-19). When there is a disconnect between the cultural experiences of a mostly White teaching force and a diverse student population, learning opportunities are diminished for students of color (Milner, 2010). By contrast to Ogbu’s (1978) explanatory model, Sanders (1997) found that an *increased* awareness of racial identity and racial struggles on the part of students caused them to engage in academics *even more*, rather than withdraw as Ogbu (1978) had suggested.

“Acting White” and oppositional culture models assume that underachievement in African American students results when students either willfully or subconsciously reject an academic standard that is somehow attributed to “Whiteness” (Ogbu, 1978; Ford et al., 2011). The underlying principle behind both is that academic success is a behavior that is either culturally opposed or denied to African American children, and thus becomes an unattainable or culturally unacceptable goal (Wildhagen, 2011). On the other hand,

internalized racial oppression suggests that African American students, while they may *desire* academic success, have adopted damaging racial stereotypes that they have been exposed to at school and elsewhere (Pyke, 2010). Perhaps believing themselves to be inferior and incapable as compared to their White peers, African American students underperform because they are acting on lowered expectations that they have internalized (Pyke, 2010). The participants in this study had been exposed to much of this thinking, and had certainly been on the receiving end of lowered expectations, but as the data analysis reveals, they overcame the emotional challenges of these mindsets with immense personal resilience and daily affirmations of their academic merit and equal standing with any other AP student.

Determining Factors for High-Achieving African American Students

While color-blindness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); “acting White” (Ford et al., 2011); and oppositional culture model (Ogbu, 1978) models are all social and psychological phenomena that attempt to explain deficits in Black students’ success, other phenomena aim to explore reasons for Black achievement (Carter-Andrews, 2009; Fisher, 2005; Marsh et al., 2012). Even with all the negative models explaining the underperformance of African American students, studies that center on *high-achieving* African American students return to one overwhelming conclusion. African American students who excel share one vital quality: resilience (Marsh et al., 2012; Griffin & Allen, 2006).

Resilience

Researchers often conclude that the driving force behind the success of Black high-achievers is their ability to persist even amidst a daily barrage of stereotype-driven

behaviors and attitudes. Marsh et al. (2012) attributed students' resilience to the strength of Black families, including religious affiliations and emphasis on academic achievement. In their study, Black students were able to tap into resilience and a strong work ethic to make a difficult transition from a homogenous school environment to a PWI, a scholars' academy whose culture and atmosphere were quite different from what the students had grown accustomed to (Marsh et al., 2012). An important conclusion about resilience in African American students is that, while it is a key to their success, it must be fostered by parents, teachers, or friends (Griffin & Allen, 2006). The students who participated in this study revealed a pattern of personal resilience, far beyond their years and far greater than what is required of their White peers, but each of them found a different source of resilience, as is discussed in the following chapters.

Racial Identity

Another related positive characteristic that seems to inform student success among African American students is a strong sense of racial identity (Hemmings, 1996; Ford et al., 2011; Whiting, 2006; Carter-Andrews, 2009). Howard (2003) identifies three significant factors to shaping African American students' racial and academic identities: parental expectations, teacher expectations, and the prospect of going to college. Racial identity development should be an important consideration for teachers and counselors, and it will be an important focal point for this study as well (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993; Baber, 2012).

Like all identities, the academic identities of African American high achievers are fluid, impressionable, and multifaceted (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012). A multitude of influences determine a student's complex racial and academic identity: religious

affiliation, family structure, social clubs, and the racial make-up of the educational setting, among others (Marsh et al., 2012). Among the most subtly dangerous influences on the racial identity of a young student is the phenomenon known as a stereotype threat, which is a type of confirmation bias (Corra et al., 2011; Solórzano et al., 2000). Steele and Aronson (1995) first described the effects that negative stereotypes can have on a standardized test or other situational performance, such as the SAT or even AP examinations. So severe are the consequences of stereotype threat that it can even prevent a “token” member of a group from remembering what is said during a class discussion and/or experience test anxiety (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 798). It is not even necessary for a group member to believe the negative stereotype for his/her performance to be diminished by the stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

At least one of the student participants in this study was aware of the dangers of stereotype threat, as she had studied it in her psychology class. While students may have an awareness of the racial and cultural biases of standardized tests, teachers gave little indication that they understood stereotype threat. The use of limited—and *limiting*—test data is discussed later, but the scholarly research clearly shows that teachers desperately need to develop an understanding of this hidden form of racism, which deeply impacts our AP program and the students who deserve to be a part of it.

Effect of the Academic Environment on Achievement and Racial Identity

With so few African American students taking AP English, isolation and other factors of the racial climate in advanced courses pose serious threats to students’ ability to perform to potential (Corra et al., 2011). Corra et al. (2011) describe “advanced academic environments” as potentially “hostile toward black students...discouraging

enrollment and hindering performance” (p. 36). With a culminating exam that determines whether students will receive college credit for the course, stereotype threats could understandably impact a student’s capacity to score well, with Black male students being the most vulnerable to this threat (Corra et al., 2011).

In studying 15 first-year African American students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI) for college, Baber (2012) discovered several factors that impact students’ shifting and evolving racial identities. Among these, the reliance on a diverse set of campus subcultures provided support for students dealing with shifting ideologies and navigating changing relationships with family and friends at home (Baber 2012). Among these were African American students who found themselves with a predominantly White friend group for the first time in their lives, and others who had previously socialized with all-White circles of friends who now found themselves with an all-Black friend group on campus (Baber 2012). These challenges posed social and personal identity challenges for students whose academic, home, and social environments were shifting (Baber, 2012). The students in this study reported similar challenges with navigating multiple friend groups, even becoming friends with White classmates who exhibited racist attitudes, or who simply failed to see the racism that their friends endured. As detailed later, a predominantly White social atmosphere complicates the already complex social world of high school.

The intricate relationship between race and achievement in a PWI is also a subject of interest in Carter-Andrews’ (2009) study of African American high achievers in a predominantly White high school. While high-achieving, Black students do not define their success in terms of race (i.e. “acting White”), they do understand how impactful

race is in their academic journeys (Carter-Andrews, 2009). Paradoxically, achievement is both “raceless and race loaded” (Carter-Andrews, 2009, p.312). Henfield and Washington (2012) found that educators in PWIs recognize the need for structured professional development and training offered by the administration of their school to teach them to address instances of racial insensitivity on the part of White students. This recognition suggests that negative encounters and influences *could* be targeted for improvement. Unfortunately, their study also revealed that the administrations of PWIs prioritize other professional development over the need for racial sensitivity (Henfield & Washington, 2012). Milner (2005) further adds that implementing a multicultural curriculum at a PWI can carry weighty consequences, both professional and personal, for the educator who seeks to bring diversity to the predominantly White students. These consequences include “being ridiculed for being too radical or for not being ‘team players’” and feeling “isolated or ostracized” by fellow faculty members (Milner, 2005, p. 401). Teachers who attempt to teach a culturally-sensitive, multicultural curriculum may even find that certain courses will be taken from them in response to their efforts (Milner, 2005). The high school that this study focuses on has had a stormy relationship with professional development related to racial issues. While there are occasional hopeful moments in professional development in which teachers are encouraged to “have difficult conversations” about race, these discussions either do not happen at all, or they are quickly suppressed. This silence is an important element of the data analysis and conclusions of this study, both as that silence pertains to teachers and students.

The Role of Literature in Shaping Academic Environment

Since literature is such an important and prevalent issue in research related to race and English Language Arts education, it is worth discussing some of the relevant research related to literature (Ketter & Lewis, 2001; Taylor & Hoechsmann, 2011). One of the most disturbing issues related to the role literature plays in creating an authentic multicultural study is the scarcity of suitable texts (Hughes-Hassel & Cox, 2010; Yoon et al., 2010). Haddix and Price-Dennis (2013) caution against selecting texts that normalize the dominant culture and exclude or diminish others. The mere presence of African American characters does not constitute multicultural literature, nor does it necessarily work to negate messages of White dominance (Yoon et al., 2010). If literature is to be a powerful resource for White teachers, it must not only prepare them for diverse student populations within the classroom, but it must also challenge and transform their worldview (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). Taylor and Hoechsmann (2011) describe the implementation of multicultural studies as a “measure of respect” (p. 219) and outline the benefits of multicultural literature, including fostering respect for the contributions of *all* cultures and learning equally from them. No matter the racial makeup of a school, a multicultural literary study is vital to the development of all students. As Taylor and Hoechsmann (2011) note, “Ultimately, multicultural curriculum reform is differently (and arguably more) important for the entire student body, not only racialized youth” (p. 225). This truth applies directly to the English courses that make up this study, as teachers have been experiencing a transformation in their own worldview, but struggle to present literary works by Black authors that have recently been added to the AP curriculum in a way that is both a “measure of respect” and also challenges the

normalized Eurocentric view of White students. To both challenge racist mindsets and maintain a culturally affirming, emotionally safe environment for Black students is an ongoing struggle for the teachers in this program.

Racial Climate: Its History and Impact on the Academic Environment

Whether the setting is a PWI or a diverse student population, the racial climate of the school is a vital concern for the success of all students (Cora et al., 2011). As chronicled by Tate (1994), the history of critical race theory begins with the court system, but expands to the larger realms of all societal institutions, including education. The racial climate of every public school in the United States has its beginnings in *Brown v Board of Education*, and, unfortunately, little progress has been made in this area in the sixty or more years since schools integrated (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). South Carolina was particularly slow to integrate schools, receiving a grade of “F” from a 1955 *Time Magazine* review of Southern states’ efforts toward desegregation (Jones, 1978). The high school that is the setting for my action research study integrated in the fall of 1970 (“School History”), and colleagues who teach there now were among the first high school students to attend post-integration, beginning in 1967 (F. Hardy, personal communication, October 11, 2017). Their own observations about our high school, both in the 1970s and in 2017, is that there are many aspects of the school’s racial climate that have not changed—at all. Scholarly literature reaffirms this notion: often “traditional” ways of understanding dominate which knowledge (and whose narratives) will be included in the curriculum and school culture of an institution (Tate, 1997). Cultural capital theory examines the significance of one’s own rich cultural experiences and values to the process of education (Tate, 1997; Baber, 2012). Students gain cultural

capital both outside and within the school, but to fully engage and educate *all* students, *all* cultural capital must be valued and welcomed into the curriculum. This reevaluation of cultural capital is especially important in academic settings where minority students are underrepresented, characterized sometimes as “White space” (Corra et al., 2011).

Issues of Enrollment and Placement of African American Students

All the previously presented research has some bearing on the recommendation of African American students in honors and AP courses in high school. However, as the literature suggests, the problem of inequitable placement of students in ability-level courses begins long before they reach high school: Elhoweris (2008) found that teachers needed to develop more culturally sensitive practices, especially related to their referrals of students to gifted and talented programs. Citing Lazar (2004), she notes that such sensitivity must be developed through “deliberate reflection and action” (Elhoweris, 2008, p. 37). Of interest to my study, most students reach my AP English class through the channel of the district’s gifted and talented program. Like the children in Elhoweris’ (2008) study, our students are referred to and placed in the GT program in elementary school, one part of the tracking process that occurs throughout a student’s public school experience. Ability tracking of students is a well-established cause of the underachievement of Black students (Corra et al., 2011; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007).

In the documentary *Waiting for Superman*, Davis Guggenheim (2010) illustrates ability level tracking using a cartoon graphic depicting students on a conveyer belt, one that routes student to both higher and lower levels on the belt system. The narration describes how a child’s future, unbeknownst to his parents, will be determined by a

school official, and that the determining factors for placement not only include standardized features, like test scores, but also completely arbitrary ones like neatness and behavior. It is no stretch, based on relevant scholarly literature presented here, to expand this illustration to include traits like race. Once students find themselves tracked in school, Guggenheim (2010) concludes, they are “running fast but falling behind.” The documentary attributes this outcome to lowered expectations and less qualified teachers often associated with these lower-tracked classes. So many aspects of this argument parallel the scholarly research about the role of race in academic achievement that one cannot help but question the legitimacy and fairness of the entire process by which students are classified and assigned in public schools.

In a study of AP enrollment and success among various minority groups in the state of Texas, Moore and Slate (2008) noted that while AP courses successfully prepare students for the rigor of college, these courses are not equally accessible to all students. The path to AP courses is often riddled with obstacles, and educators need to shift their thinking about who should and can take these classes (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). This issue revisits the notions of several other areas of study: teacher expectations and the impact they have on achievement; the unjustified and damaging overdependence on standardized test scores to make decision about students; and the questionable practices of ability tracking that have far-reaching impacts on student success for years to come, extending well into college and adulthood (Corra et al., 2011; Yonezawa & Jones, 2006; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). The overwhelming conclusion from all the available research points to one overarching theme: the need to

remove barriers to African American students (and other minorities) that perpetuate rather than resolve the gaps that exist—achievement and opportunity gaps alike.

Culturally Sensitive Research Performed by White Researchers

Castagno (2013) is a White researcher who has extensively researched the behaviors and attitudes of White educators that propagate institutional racism in education and normalize Whiteness in the curriculum. She primarily focuses on the “protection of Whiteness” that permeates educator efforts to meet the needs of students of color (Castagno, 2013, pp. 104-105). Her twin observations of “colorblind difference” and “powerblind sameness” explain how White teachers claim neutrality in how they view racially diverse student groups, yet, in that false worldview, ignore and ironically support the very oppressive power structures that create inequality (p.101). As a critical ethnographer, Castagno’s (2013) data collection included various observation styles and interviews, methods which would make her positionality as a White researcher obvious. Because she compared two schools with very different demographics (one mostly White and the other with a high population of minority students), her research consisted of a fuller picture of Whiteness as it influences teacher behaviors and student outcomes (Castagno, 2013). Her conclusions reach all levels of the hierarchy of educators, not merely individual teacher practices; her concluding recommendations address the need for greater awareness of the disturbing paradoxes of multicultural education at all levels, including district administrations. Castagno (2013) notes that “most educators are well intentioned and want what is best for their students, but whiteness is protected despite (and sometimes through) even the best intentions” (p. 123). This insight both understands

and admonishes a White instructor's perspective and complicity in the state of racial inequality in education in a way that perhaps only White researcher can (Tillman, 2002).

Ketter and Lewis (2001) likewise are White researchers examining the practice of White teachers, but they focus on a predominantly White rural community. Like Castagno (2013), these White female researchers confronted the false notion of White teachers that colorblindness is a positive attribute and one that benefits students. Ketter and Lewis (2001) also identify twin concepts about views of multicultural literature commonly held by White teachers: "teaching neutral texts and teaching universal themes" (p. 177). These ambiguous, misguided notions of what is meant by multiculturalism in education are commonplace among White educators (Milner, 2010).

In my own research context, I am already somewhat aware of these same attitudes at work among White teachers, who are perhaps well-intended but who impede progress nonetheless. Understanding the well-established research on these ambiguities among White teachers and reading assessments of them written by White researchers offers support and guidance for my own study (Castagno, 2013; Ketter & Lewis, 2001). Ketter and Lewis (2001) primarily interacted with White teachers over multiple years in the context of a book club that opened avenues for discussion of multicultural literature. Ketter and Lewis (2001) observe, "Such complexity is not likely to be revealed through one-day workshops on multiculturalism or mandates from principals or curriculum committees to use more multicultural literature...[it] comes only through long-term, open-minded, and respectful dialogue" (pp. 182-183). Sadly, most of the professional development at my high school that addresses racial issues fits the context that Ketter and Lewis (2001) describe: one- or two-hour workshops, ones that are quickly forgotten,

never followed up with another session, and even worse, are more likely to leave instructors feeling good about themselves than challenged to examine their mindsets or change their teaching practices. The majority of these professional development sessions are merely *offered*, among a selection of many possibilities, are attended almost exclusively by teachers who already feel a need to become more culturally and racially sensitive in their professional and personal lives.

While Black researchers have addressed issues of educational inequities and deficits, the added perspective of White researchers rounds out the voices calling for change and demonstrates that racial equality in education is not a Black concern only, but a concern that everyone should share (Milner, 2010).

Conclusion

Much of the research into the experience of African American students to this point has been built upon the historical and theoretical framework of CRT, which, while commonly accepted, only seems to have weight in the realm of scholars and research. In the day-to-day operation of public schools, no one discusses CRT or attempts to frame professional development around it. The underlying premise of CRT, that every major institution in society is dominated by a racially based power structure that benefits White people, informs much of what happens in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). Among those consequences is the problem of practice at the heart of my study: the underrepresentation of African American students in AP English courses (Corra et. al., 2011). Another significant theoretical principle of this literature review is the concept of deficit thinking (Milner, 2012). Conversations at my school about increasing African

American enrollment and success have typically centered on what *students* can or should do to be more willing, more prepared, or more aware of opportunities (Milner, 2012).

Research centered on African American students, especially those who are high-achievers, informs my research by completing the student side of the educational equation; after all, education is about a relationship between teacher and student (Milner, 2010). Knowing the commonly accepted theories about Black student achievement establishes a foundational understanding of the problem of practice. Among the many theories that apply to achievement, the most pertinent to my research are somewhat held in controversy. Oppositional culture model and “acting White” are two response theories that suggest African American students resist achievement (including advanced level courses) as an act of rebellion against a system that does not benefit them or is culturally associated with Whiteness (Ogbu, 1978; Wildhagen, 2011). Other response theories that enjoy a great deal of traffic in research circles are the stereotype threat principle (Corra et al., 2011), cultural capital theory (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Wildhagen, 2009); internalized racial oppression (Pyke, 2010), and resiliency theory (Marsh et al., 2012). All of these explanations examine how systemic racism affects African American students both in their academic choices as well as in their potential for success in academic programs and testing scenarios.

Educator attitudes and responses are equally important to my action research study. As opposed to deficit thinking, which focuses on achievement gaps, a focus on opportunity gaps examines what educators, not students, should do or provide to enable African American students to not only participate, but thrive in a culturally sensitive and emotionally safe academic environment (Milner, 2012). Colorblindness is the most

damaging of these attitudes, but other educator beliefs—such as attitudes toward standardized testing, access to Gifted and Talented programs, and beliefs about ability tracking—all affect the achievement of African American students, who are disadvantaged by all these processes (Corra et al., 2011).

The current study I have undertaken seeks to address the problem of practice by combining several factors previously studied in isolation or in other contexts: a White researcher studying herself and other White instructors in predominantly White course situation within a larger, more diverse student population. The students in question are high-achieving students who are well-qualified for AP English courses, and the teachers are veterans with a minimum of ten-years' experience. The goal of this study is to disrupt the inequitable enrollment practices in AP English courses at my high school by abandoning previous thinking about this problem, looking away from standardized test data and list of works to be taught, and favoring the stories and voices of the students themselves. Foregoing any more interventions until a new perspective of the problem is reached, the investigation will uncover previously unexplored knowledge through the systematic collection and analysis of data in the form of students' stories and authentic responses to questions about the choice to enroll in AP English, as well as their experiences with their classmates, teachers, content, and social/learning environment after entering the course.

Chapter 3

Critical Ethnography: Collective Narratives and Counternarrative

This research study, based in critical race theory (CRT), explored the reasons for the disproportionately low number of African American students enrolled in AP English classes compared to the schoolwide population, examining how the students and instructors of these courses perceive this problem. It also examined the participants' experiences and attitudes as they are affected by the system that they are part of. The purpose of this study was to disrupt the inequitable enrollment practices in AP English courses at my high school by abandoning previous thinking about this problem, looking away from standardized test data and lists of works to be taught, and favoring the stories and voices of the students themselves. Foregoing any more interventions until a new perspective of the problem is reached, the investigation uncovered previously unexplored knowledge through the systematic collection and analysis of data in the form of students' stories and authentic responses to questions about the choice to enroll in AP English, as well as their experiences with their classmates, teachers, content, and social/learning environment after entering the course.

The study is significant because it confronts a decades-old issue that has been informally discussed and unsystematically addressed, but without marked or consistent results. Its significance also rests in its emancipatory nature as it seeks to promote change

for a marginalized and underserved group of students. The three main questions to be addressed in this research study are:

1. What reasons do students and teachers attribute to the low enrollment of African American students in AP Literature and Language courses relative to the school African American student population?
2. What does critical race theory say about how these perceptions have shaped previous interventions pertaining to recruitment and enrollment practices?
3. How does applying CRT offer new ways of understanding this particular problem?

The remainder of this chapter describes the elements of the critical ethnography and its participants, as well as the data collection strategies that will be used to conduct the study. The focus of student interviews will be outlined, as well as the process of documenting responses, coding those responses, and validating them through member checks. The structuring of subsequent interviews of colleagues, both fellow instructors and administrators, will be discussed. The synthesis of data and compilation of representative responses will be presented.

Research Design and Investigation

This study is a hybrid of qualitative action research and practitioner-inquiry research, more specifically a critical ethnography examining two different perspectives of the problem of practice: AP English students and the teachers who teach AP English and its feeder courses, including their use of school policy to recruit students to their courses. In addition, the study also qualifies as radical action research since it has “emancipatory interests” aimed at correcting power imbalances that disadvantage minority students

(Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 35). The study consists of a cycle of individual interviews that I conducted as a participant/teacher-researcher with an emic perspective that builds on my existing rapport with colleagues and students (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collection consisted of individual interviews leading to thick descriptions of each perspective about the AP English program's inability to attract or recruit African American students. From the responses offered by each perspective, I examined how these perceptions and attitudes are both tied to previous efforts to resolve the problem and can also generate new approaches based on the Culturally Relevant Teaching framework. The initial round of individual interviews consisted of a standard set of questions for all student participants. By focusing on the voices of the traditionally underserved students, I used the CRT framework to lay the foundation for further interviews with those participants who operate within the institutionally oppressive system. Student responses were used to develop a preliminary understanding that shaped the questions for the second round of interviews with a focus group of instructors. These questions further explored the relationship between the various perspectives about the lack of racial diversity in AP English and the previous steps that have been taken to address the problem.

The main construct on which the study was built is the relationship between policy and practices that disadvantage African American students and the attitudes or perceptions that shape them. Since racial differences are socially constructed and perpetuated, a deeper understanding of social attitudes and interactions is the essence of all social interactions. In the case of this study, these social constructs are significant because they subtly but powerfully inform all aspects of faculty-student interactions and

relationships, including enrollment, instructional practices, disciplinary action, grading practices, and a host of hidden curriculum issues that impact student achievement and overall well-being. An exploration of the impact that these constructs have had on student participants as those constructs pertain to their involvement and experiences in AP English laid the foundation to investigate and challenge the perceptions of the adult participants who are charged with making decisions about these students and their opportunities for academic success.

Context of Setting

The setting of the study is the English department of an urban high school, focusing on the AP classes taught within the department. The courses in question are predominantly White and populated by mostly students from affluent, professional families with college-educated parents. The high school is the flagship school of the district, which is a majority-minority school district where some of the schools are predominantly Black and others predominantly White. The problem of practice that is the focus of the study exists on a much larger scale, as it has been the subject of a College Board initiative to correct a nationwide imbalance between White students and students of color enrolled in AP courses. The macro setting is much larger and more complicated in that the educational inequities of the College Board, the AP program, and even the school system at-large are all reflective of the racism that is deeply woven into the fabric of this nation and every institution within it (Tate, 1997; Ford, 2013; Tatum, 2017).

I am simultaneously the researcher, planner and organizer of the study, and a teacher who is the subject of it. In addition to this emic perspective, I am also the English department chairperson, and an AP English teacher of twenty years. Having taught both

AP English courses in question, I am familiar with the content of both courses, as well as the nature of the longstanding diversity deficit in each one. The colleagues who will participate have worked together for at least ten years and regularly collaborate on all sorts of issues from policy to content to instructional strategies. The strength and duration of the working relationship is an asset to the study as collegiality and trust have already been established. Most importantly, the other teachers and I have a good rapport with all students being interviewed.

Participants

For this study, three English teachers at the school were selected, constituting a purposeful, representative sample (Efron & Ravid, 2013). One of the teachers has twelve years of experience and teaches both the 11th grade AP English course and the 10th grade feeder course. According to the most recent National Teacher and Principal Survey released by the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly two-thirds of high school teachers are female and 80% of teachers are White (Loewus, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). To provide a different perspective, the other teacher participant is an African American teacher with thirty years of experience who also teaches 12th grade Honors English. Because she teaches the students who could potentially take AP English, but who elect not to take it for whatever reason, she has a perspective that rounds out the input of AP teachers. All three teachers are also volunteer participants in that each was contacted individually and invited to participate, but given the option to decline for any reason, without explanation. As such, they are more likely to be motivated to participate and offer authentic responses to interview questions. In the following descriptions, I give more detailed insight into each teacher participant.

Mrs. Morgan is 35 years old and has been teaching for 12 years, first at a middle school in our district, and later at the freshman academy before joining the high school English department. She is soft-spoken and gentle, but also commands the respect of her colleagues and students because of her natural leadership, unwavering professionalism, and impressive knowledge of her subject matter. While she is quiet and humble, she is also confident in her ability to discuss and present issues of race, class, and gender to her students in fact-based explorations of contemporary social issues. Her teaching style appeals to her students because she finds relevant, timely applications to classic works of literature and invites students to interrogate their own attitudes and opinions about those topics. She is a popular teacher, whom students often cite as having taught them a great deal about formal writing. As a colleague, Mrs. Morgan has been honored as Teacher of the Year, and she is National Board Certified and has been selected as a reader/scorer for the AP English Language and Composition exam.

Mrs. Roberts is also 35 years old and has been teaching for 12 years, the first four of which she taught eighth grade language arts in a neighboring district. She is the mother of two young daughters, both of whom are under the age of two. Mrs. Roberts teaches creative writing and is responsible for the annual publication of the school's literary magazine, which features students' writing, photography, and art work. She is also a popular teacher because she is fun and creative, and also incorporates a great deal of real-life applications to the literature she teaches. She uses music, movies, memes, and Ted Talks to supplement her teaching and appeal to the entertainment styles that are familiar to her students. Mrs. Roberts and I work closely to develop unit and lesson plans, and we have been intentional about incorporating more female authors and more African

American authors into the AP curriculum. As it pertains directly to this study, Mrs. Roberts and I have tried to increase the number of students of color in our classes by reaching out to 11th grade Honors English students with personal invitations to join AP English. We have requested the test scores of all juniors to find students of any academic distinction to find students who have strong verbal ability, but are not on our radar for AP enrollment. Mrs. Roberts demonstrates a commitment and a passion for greater social equality in our school, a quality that makes her an interesting candidate for this study. Like myself and Mrs. Morgan, Mrs. Roberts is a well-intentioned White teacher, but like all of us, she finds herself frustrated with our limited success at including more Black students in our program.

Mrs. Jones is the only non-AP English teacher among the teacher participants. She is a 34-year veteran teacher who has spent her entire teaching career at Glenbrook High School. Many years ago, she taught 10th-grade, gifted and talented English courses, but stopped teaching them after a series of bad experiences, some racist, that have prevented her from ever considering teaching GT or AP courses again. In terms of seniority, Mrs. Jones is the second longest serving teacher in the department, and she is knowledgeable about the history of the school and its programs. That knowledge is one of the two reasons she was selected for this study. Her ability to give context to the comments of the less experienced teachers is invaluable. The second reason she has been selected is her teaching assignments; as the teacher of the dual credit course sponsored by our local community college and the 12th-grade Honors English instructor, Mrs. Jones spends her entire day with students who are comparable in ability and motivation to those Mrs. Roberts and I teach in AP English Literature and Composition. She also teaches the

students whom Mrs. Morgan taught in 11th grade AP English who have elected not to continue in AP English as seniors. By comparing our experiences and insights with hers, I hope to learn about shared experiences and attitudes, as well as differing ones that may shed light on the problem of practice.

Most importantly, the participants in this study include current AP English students. From these interviews, I gathered crucial insight into what students believe about the reasons for the disproportionate enrollment of White and African American students in AP English. They provided insight to the most recent, current perspectives on the problem of practice. The students I selected to interview are African American girls, eighteen years old, who are college-bound seniors. Two of them were in my fourth-period class, one was in my first period, and the fourth interviewee was in my sixth period. It was important to me to get perspectives from different class periods, especially since these separate classes have different “personalities” and represent different social contexts. These will be described in more detail in Chapter 4. Furthermore, since much of what I now know about these students emerged during interviews and thus constitute “data” that has been collected and analyzed, I will provide a more complete description of each girl in Chapter 4.

Quality of the Action Research Project

Quality criteria for qualitative studies can be tricky because data is often collected in the form of researcher observations and interview responses from participants. Although coding responses brings order to the wide variety of data gathered, other criteria help ensure quality in this type of research. Thick descriptions gave validity to observations and interview notes (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015; Tracy, 2010).

Subtleties like facial expressions, gestures, and other situational or contextual clues can go unrecorded and undocumented, but through careful notetaking and thick descriptions, I avoided this as much as possible.

In addition to transparency, triangulation, and thick descriptions, other issues related to credibility should be addressed to ensure qualitative research quality. Member checks and member reflections ensured that my notes are accurate and provided new data for the study (Tracy, 2010). With no numbers to check and recheck, the accuracy of participant statements, written and spoken, must be ensured.

The quality of a study is partially determined by the significant contribution it makes to existing theoretical frameworks, its practical application to a problem of practice, or to the future of educational research (Tracy, 2010). Above all, a qualitative research study must be ethical in order to have quality. Issues related to ethics range from procedural ethics to situational ethics and include such matters as informed consent, do-no-harm, and respect for all stakeholders. In this study, all participants received informed consent explanations that explained how their privacy and confidentiality would be protected. Because I have good relationships with all participants, I had already gained the trust of each, assuring authentic responses.

The quality criteria that apply to my study most directly are transparency, triangulation, and credibility. From the beginning, I knew that I was entering my study with some underlying assumptions about the reasons that so few African American students enroll in AP English courses (English Language & Composition and English Literature & Composition). For this reason, I worked to be transparent about my own biases and assumptions (Pine, 2009; Tracy, 2010). Since it would have been easy for me

to react strongly to any response that validated those assumptions, it was also crucial that I triangulated data by making sure that my conclusions were built on data that was repeated by at least two sources or at least two data collection methods (Pine, 2009; Tracy, 2010). My field notes were based not only on the original interviews and focus group meetings, but also from repeatedly listening to or watching audio or video recordings to make further observations that will lead to thick descriptions (Tracy, 2010). These findings were subjected to member checks to ensure further credibility (Tracy, 2010).

As much as it challenged my comfort level with sharing my work with others, I worked hard to be as transparent as possible in my qualitative action research study. As I already mentioned, I maintained password-protected audio recordings and typed transcripts of focus group meetings and individual interviews so that I could take more complete notes. Like most people I know, I am uncomfortable with audio and video recordings of myself, so I tried to make participants comfortable with the notion of being recorded. I also conducted an investigation into methods for taking good field notes, coding responses, and writing thick descriptions (Saldaña, 2009). As an English teacher, I found it rather easy to write full, thick descriptions, but I also had to ensure that my observations allowed for the most accurate, complete descriptions possible. Another issue of credibility that was a concern to me was making sure that my own opinions as both researcher and participant did not have an undue influence on the other participants. As their department chairperson, I could possibly have an unintended effect on conversations and situations, so I had to be aware of how my positionality may affect credibility.

Data Collection Measures, Instruments and Tools

All the data in this qualitative study was derived from interview responses and coded for common themes and patterns. The categories were emerging (Efron & Ravid, 2013; Saldaña, 2009), but were determined in an ongoing way as the data is collected, using the constant comparative analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The themes and patterns that emerged in the early stages of data collection provided a foundation for later interviews, but new categories were added as additional categories emerged. A second cycle of interviews was held once the first set of data had been analyzed as described below. The second set of questions was developed from the coded responses to the first interviews so that the second cycle was profoundly shaped by the first. In this manner, the marginalized group of students participating in the study will give their voice to the process first, as CRT emphasizes the value of both voice and personal storytelling in analyzing systematic and institutional racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tate, 1997). In fact, the most telling and powerful responses from the teacher participants came in response to the summary statements from the student interviews that teachers were shown.

The questions for individual, recorded interviews were developed by me as the practitioner/researcher based on previous experiences in the district and with teaching AP English, study of similar action research studies conducted from the CRT perspective (summarized in Chapter 2 of this dissertation), and the research provided by the College Board in its own efforts to address diversity in the nationwide AP program. A list of questions used in the student interviews has been included in the Appendix. The questions asked of colleagues addressed a variety of factors that influence minority

enrollment in AP English classes at the high school being studied. A list of these questions can also be found in the Appendix.

Research Procedure

Individual student interviews were conducted on campus in the classroom, a familiar setting where students would feel most comfortable. The focus group interview with teachers took place in my classroom, where the department typically meets throughout the school year. All interviews were audio-recorded using a school-issued laptop, and these audio recordings were then used to create typed transcripts. From the combination of audio and written transcripts, I took notes, annotated the transcripts, and generated coded themes that emerged from interviews. The process occurred for the student interviews in full before interviews with colleagues were conducted to ensure that the voices of African American students became the foundation of interviews with adult participants.

All participants were given consent forms and notified that they would be de-identified for the transcripts, notes, and coding of data. As researcher-participant, I transcribed all interviews and coded the transcripts using emerging theory to develop categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2009).

Treatment, Processing and Analysis of Data

For Research Question 1, the data was analyzed by cross-referencing the transcripts of the interviewees for similarities and significant differences, including coding categories unique to any one group or categories that transcend all interviews. When the responses of individuals or groups were found to be in contradiction with one

another, these were logged and analyzed for the source of the discrepancy. The responses of all interviews were summarized and subjected to member checks to validate them.

For Research Question 2, I examined responses from each group to specific questions and applied these to the previous attempts to address the Problem of Practice and the success or failure of each. I further attempted to triangulate data by matching emerging codes with the type of attempt made before and the faculty/staff perceptions that motivated those attempts at a solution. To avoid researcher assumptions about these connections, each faculty participant was asked explicitly how they felt about previous interventions and what they felt may have motivated them. Since students were unaware of previous interventions and were not present for their implementation, they were not asked about these efforts specifically. They were asked, however, open-ended questions that encouraged them to respond to the notion of interventions, and these responses were compared to those given by faculty participants.

For Research Question 3, responses were analyzed vis-a-vis the scholarly work of experts in the field of CRT as it pertains to education, particularly the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), Richard Milner (2005,2012), Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017), and Donna Ford (2013). Just as the data collection and methodology were based on the collective voices and storytelling of a group of African American students to tell the story of the system as it currently underrepresents and disenfranchises them, so the application of a CRT perspective interpreted the perceptions of the adult participants to complete the story. This fuller picture, including a CRT interpretation of the investigation should more meaningfully lead to future interventions, which will be suggested and explored in the discussion and conclusion of the study.

Summary

This action research study addressed the low minority enrollment in AP English courses at an urban high school in the Upstate of South Carolina. The research questions explored the perspectives of teachers and most importantly students as they relate to this Problem of Practice. The data collection instruments were interviews within a cyclical interview series, each of which were later compared and triangulated with one other. Interview transcripts were coded using emerging categories, which overlap somewhat across perspective groups. Having interviewed both groups, a final assessment of the data was written. A final, informal meeting or communication with participants was held to debrief everyone and to collaborate about potential solutions to the Problem of Practice; unfortunately, not everyone could attend a final meeting, so the results of this meeting were not as broadly applicable as I had hoped. The third research question, which asks how a collaborative group of faculty can make strides toward increasing minority AP enrollment, is addressed through the compiled responses to all interviews as well as the examination of these collective responses through a CRT lens in the Conclusion of this document.

Chapter 4

Heavy Social Burden: Carrying the Invisible Luggage of Racism

Overview of Study

The data presented here was collected during the Spring Semester of the 2019 academic year at Glenbrook High School to explore the reasons that various stakeholders attribute to the disproportionately low enrollment of African American students in AP English as compared to schoolwide demographics. Founded in critical race theory (CRT), the study used practitioner inquiry as its methodological framework to examine the attitudes of African American students, AP teachers, and administrators to examine the failings of previous interventions on the part of the school and faculty.

Data was first collected from four African American students through a series of individual interviews conducted in the classroom during their free class periods or after school. These interviews were transcribed, coded, and triangulated to generate a series of statements of commonalities or themes among the four girls' responses. Ten statements were written, excluding any details that might link the students' identities to their responses, to present to the three English teachers from the purposeful sample of faculty members. These instructors were gathered during a designated, collaborative meeting time for the entire faculty, for a closed-door, confidential focus group meeting. During this group session, faculty participants were first asked to share their views on the previous efforts on the part of the school generally, English department, and individual

teachers to address the problem. Having shared an overview of previous efforts, they were then given an overview of the data collected from the student interviews and asked to respond. The remainder of the meeting was a discussion that revolved around participants' reflections of their own instructional practices, their reactions to the students' shared experiences and attitudes, and their initial ideas for a way to move forward.

The participants from each perspective constitute a purposeful sampling of each stakeholder type. The student participants, well known to me as my own students throughout the school year, had previously demonstrated their willingness and relative comfort with talking about issues related to race, especially those that affect their school. All four were vocal advocates for the school's Black History Club, and challenged the school administration's response when the club sought to increase the schoolwide celebration of Black History Month. Furthermore, in the classroom setting, all four students had actively participated in Socratic seminars in which issues of race became a topic of conversation. Each student had shared personal connections to texts and Ted Talks with their classmates and had done so without prompting from their instructor or classmates. Their inclination to share their experiences made them good candidates for interviewing, especially since their interviews added the elements of privacy and confidentiality to their statements and narratives.

The faculty participants were selected for their proximity to the problem of practice and their years of experience teaching the students in AP and honors English. Of the two AP English instructors in the focus group, one teaches juniors in AP English Language and Composition and the other co-teaches AP English Literature and

Composition to seniors. As such, these three individuals work with the same students and use the same policies and procedures for recruiting and enrolling students. The fourth member of the focus group has taught honors English to seniors for many years and dual credit English to seniors for the past two years. As such, she teaches many of the students who selected either of her two course instead of AP English. She is also the only African American teacher in the focus group, or for that matter, the only AA teacher who chooses to teach honors English courses. Significantly, this teacher has spent her entire teaching career, thirty-six years total, at Glenbrook High School and has a historical knowledge of the school and district that far exceeds that of any other member of the focus group.

Inquiry Instead of Intervention

As described in more detail to follow, the historically low enrollment of African American students in AP English has been the focus of individual efforts on the part of AP English teachers for many years. These interventions, though informal and largely uninformed, were purposeful and well-intended. Since several faculty members had previously attempted and failed to make significant improvements to this problem, the goal of this practitioner-inquiry research became to understand it better first by examining the narrative that has driven these efforts by juxtaposing it with the counter narratives of this underserved student population. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) address the significance of this approach in their discussion of eight passions that drive practitioner inquiry, one of which is “advocating for social justice” (p. 56). Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) describe similar situations to mine, in which “storage areas are littered with the debris of unsuccessful attempts to address and remedy the problem” (p. 59). The authors further suggest that the value of an inquiry-based approach to multiple,

failed interventions with problems that defy “neat, definitive answers” is that inquiry becomes a “catalyst to uncover hidden assumptions and issues” (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 63). This fundamental difference between intervention- and inquiry-based approaches to qualitative research captures well the rationale for this study’s basis in inquiry. Inquiry is a means to reach an understanding about previous attempts to increase African American enrollment in AP courses, and make a path forward that first aims to better appreciate the personal experiences of those being negatively impacted by the problem. In so doing, we can avoid another naive attempt at an intervention on their behalf.

General Findings/Results from Student Interviews

It is almost impossible to isolate AP English from the larger picture of our school and district. AP English cannot exist in a bubble, and the social and academic atmosphere of this larger picture spills over onto our program, in addition to whatever problems we may identify that are unique to the English department. To that end, I have incorporated data that pertains to classes and situations outside of AP English, especially when it is clear that they have impacted a student’s well-being in all of her classes, not merely the classroom where an incident took place. The relationships among students and teachers do not start and stop at the classroom door, so my data analysis follows the girls I interviewed throughout their day even though my classroom is only one stop along their daily journey to achieve and succeed in the face of so many obstacles.

Getting in and Staying in

*Have you ever been racially profiled just because you were in the minority
Or does that make you feel good about yourself because you are in authority*

*Take a step in my shoes and realize
My culture will never truly be accepted in your eyes*

*Take a walk in our shoes and head over to an AP class
One where it is anticipated that I fall face first, because of my expected “sass”*

*You don't even have to take a baby step to have an epiphany
Place one foot in my shoes and you'll hate the treatment for me*

From “A Walk in Our Shoes,” an original poem by Kristen

When I first began inviting students to speak to me about their experiences in AP English, I did so casually at the beginning or end of a class period, and judging by their interest, sent them a follow-up email with more details about the process. I was a bit surprised by how nervous I felt asking students to be interviewed, but my fears were quickly laid to rest by the immediate and positive replies I received from each girl. All four of them were eager to talk to me, answered questions with more details and examples than I ever expected, and spent much more time than I had anticipated in the interview. My nervousness was soon offset by how freely they opened up to me and how calmly they recounted stories that made my blood boil with anger. All four students had shared stories about race before, so I was already familiar with some of their experiences. What I did not know—could not have known, I suppose—was that the things they had already shared with me were merely the tip of the iceberg and that I was about to feel shock, anger, sadness—a host of emotions that for the most part, the students clearly feel but do not openly express. So as I have written this chapter, I find myself outraged again, yet I remember well their steady voices, calm demeanor, and inexplicable acceptance of the terrible state of affairs in AP and Honors courses at Glenbrook High School

The African American students I interviewed reported feeling *discouraged* from taking higher level classes, with instructors or counselors suggesting that they might not

be able to handle the rigor or the workload. Erica [pseudonym], for example, shared the story of being told she had not experienced enough academic growth in an 8th grade history course to be recommended for an honors course in high school. Her average in the 8th grade course was a 97, a grade she says she will never forget. Even more memorable—and more painful—was Erica’s overhearing a White, male classmate with a grade much lower than hers, sail through to the same honors course she was told she could not handle.

Sarah [pseudonym] recalls receiving similar discouragement at the end of 10th grade when she wanted to enroll in AP English Language and Composition. She was told she “may not do well” and “may struggle,” words that Sarah describes as upsetting: “I’ve always liked English so it’s kind of like ‘oh...’ It was really discouraging. I had a really hard time. Like I cried and cried and cried about it.” In fact, Sarah was uncertain why she was not recommended, and only recalls that “it was based off some score maybe,” a statement she makes with uncertainty and hesitation, as she searches for the answer, even now. With the support of a friend (Kristen [pseudonym], as it turns out), who had also been told she would not do well, Sarah went through the appeals process and was admitted into the program—but not without significant emotional distress and the additional obstacle of completing the appeals process. When asked about their current English status, Sarah replied with confidence: “And we both stayed *two* years. *Two* years.” She says this with great pride, seeming to feel validated and vindicated for the insult of being rejected at first.

Sadly, not all of Sarah’s friends overcame the discouragement: “I knew my friends wouldn’t be in [AP English]. I just knew that because they had teachers telling them the same thing...Nobody was saying, ‘Maybe you should try AP English’, you

know?” If not overtly discouraged, Black students sometimes feel that no one encouraged them or talked to them about all their academic options. Sarah continued by saying, “Even if a teacher doesn’t tell you, it’s like something like, ‘you won’t do good there...that’s too hard for you.’ Without really having a chance.” Similarly, Kim [pseudonym] says that she “wasn’t really exposed to the idea of AP.” Kim is a calm, reserved young woman, who recalls with quiet confidence how she found her own way to AP courses through curiosity and initiative:

I’m sure I knew like the general idea of what it was but it wasn’t like, ‘Oh, you can take that So... in 9th and 10th grade... I was like, “What are you guys [honors and AP students] taking that I’m missing out on?”

Despite the discouragement or lack of encouragement, once they experienced the course for themselves, students found that the course was not as difficult as they had been led to believe. They assessed AP courses as challenging, but doable. Kim says, “I decided to give it a try and it actually fit me...and I felt like it was necessary to move up and give myself some sort of challenge.” Invariably, these four girls cite the need to challenge themselves as a rationale for taking AP courses, even in the absence of encouragement from teachers. That drive to choose a more challenging course came from home support and their own personal sense of motivation, issues that will be discussed in greater length later.

Once enrolled in an AP course, the struggle for Black students is far from over. Staying in the class is an issue that each participant referenced in numerous ways. I heard many references to feeling that they must work harder than their White classmates—not just to get into AP courses, but also to gain respect and to keep respect of their peers and

their instructors. The girls I interviewed often used the phrase “prove myself” to describe scenarios in which they were required to work harder simply to stay on equal footing in the class. Kim states it well: “A lot of times a bad day may not be because they [a Black student] got number five wrong on a test, but maybe because they were viewed as less than the person taking the same test beside them.” Erica would agree, as she tells me sadly, looking down as she speaks, “I still feel like I have to prove myself. Everyday.” However, the personal determination of these girls has brought them to a place of confidence. Kim, for one, says she no longer feels that she must prove herself to her classmates, noting with her typical quiet confidence,

I'm not really the type of person that feels like I have to prove my worthiness to someone. But it's more like I'm letting you know that I'm not in here because of a handout. I'm just not. I'm just as smart if not smarter than you are in this setting. But what about the students who find themselves in College Prep classes, those Sarah says “started off in the same kindergarten class in the same elementary school”? Sarah has her own theory:

They have been subconsciously taught that “You can’t do it. You just can’t”....

It’s just a mindset and I’ve just always been that child that was like “you can’t tell me” because you know our mama always kind of raised us with confidence. But if you had, if you don't have that rebellion, that little bit of sassy, that rude, like “Sorry, you're just the teacher and you don't actually know what's going on in my head”... [Then] you don’t have that. You’re told you can’t do it.

Similarly, Kristen admonishes that one must be “mentally *strong*” to navigate the process of getting into and staying in AP and honors courses, a statement she makes as she looks

directly into my eyes and enunciates each word carefully, adding all the emphasis that she can. It is as if Kristen wants to make certain that I understand the full weight of what she is telling me, and I immediately latch onto this phrase that she has left hanging in the air. In fact, all the personal testimonies I collected absolutely support Kristen's claim, so her emphasis is not lost but reinforced over all the interviews.

What is it like?

*Have you ever felt misplaced
Like before you even start, you've already come last in the race*

*Have you ever been afraid to raise your hand or speak out
Or constantly mute your mouth when your soul is screaming out*

*How about being singled out because your hair defies gravity
Or maybe even my way thinking, especially when I have my own strategy*

From "A Walk in Our Shoes," an original poem by Kristen

Daily life in AP courses is riddled with racism, which the students I interviewed encounter in many ways. African American students in AP are faced with both subtle and overt racism, which is more difficult to face alone, as Black students often are. Sarah, for instance, speaks of "little comments" that classmates make to her or in her presence, but they are not "little" to her at all. These microaggressions became a running theme among student responses. Solorzano et al. (2000) define microaggressions as "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (p. 60). These moments may go undetected to the untrained eye or casual observer, particularly a White classmate or instructor. Sarah and Kristen each recount stories of receiving a "brush off" from students during group work, such as a science lab. With mounting frustration, Kristen recalls an insulting encounter:

So we were all we were all sitting at the lab table and I was explaining something or I said an answer loud enough for everyone to hear, but *no*... My lab partner, she turns to someone else. Mind you, I'm *right beside her* talking to her. She turns to someone else and *in my face*, just makes it seem like I'm just *so wrong*.

Everything that I said was *so wrong* and the person that she talked to basically answered her with the same thing that I said and they got the credit for.

Kristen speaks clearly and plainly, frequently emphasizing crucial statements in a way that expresses the justifiable bitterness she still feels. The feelings from this moment are clearly still fresh for her, and those emotions drive her telling of the story. Kristen offers this anecdote as explanation for having “learned to back off,” but allows that occurrences like this one continue to happen “pretty often,” despite her self-imposed silence. Kristen further says,

I always feel like I have to prove myself. Whereas some of my White peers are just—they can say what they want and they're correct. *All the time*. But if I say something I have to back it up with further *deep research* in order to get the same, you know, respect.

Kristen's emphasis on “*deep research*” is quite telling of the constant, extra requirement of her, as a Black girl in AP courses, to prove herself to her peers.

Interviewees report that being the only Black student in a class, which happens frequently, means these moments are even more difficult to endure because there is no other Black student to share their frustration, anger, or embarrassment. Uniformly, the girls interviewed describe “getting used to” being the only Black student in an AP class. Erica, for example, says,

If [you're] just the only Black student ... and this is something like I learned ... cause I've been the only Black student in some of my classes for many years, so it's something I just deal with now. It has gotten easier in a way because like [AP English Literature], I've seen more Black people in class compared to my AP Lang class last year, I was the only Black girl in there.

Each student participant made similar references to the vulnerability of being the only Black student in a course, and while having another Black student in the class does not diminish the impact of the racism they face, it does seem to provide support and understanding for dealing with the ugliness they often face. Kim recalls her entire school career as being characterized by being the sole Black student in a class:

I kind of got used to being that one out of two in a class of 15 or 20 so it would probably be just me.... I went from Odyssey and Odyssey honors I was the honors to AP and then it would basically be like the same ratio or just even walking maybe you'd like walking past the classroom... because I walk past plenty of classrooms like you can look in... If I were to go right into Miss Scott's [pseudonym] classroom is such a more brown classroom. And then if I look across the hall into calculus, you see *me* in a sea of lights and brightness [laughs a bit].

Kim's ability to laugh at the "sea of lights and brightness" is testament to her individual manner of dealing with being the only Black girl in class, which is unique to her, as the other interviewees spoke of it with stoicism. These varying responses speak to how shared experiences, even ones that are quite painful, evoke different coping strategies from each girl.

Being the only Black student, or even the only Black girl in a class, has an emotionally damaging side effect, which is the persistent feeling of loneliness and isolation. For the young women whom I interviewed, this loneliness is something they must endure all day, every day because they are taking honors or AP courses in which the demographic imbalances are pervasive. When asked how she would characterize her experiences in AP classes, Erica responded, “You feel kind of lonesome ... lonely in a way. And I would characterize it as challenging ... not fitting in a little bit.” In particular, Erica noted that when conversations veer off-topic, she often feels excluded because “what you say won't really count.” Her endurance of this isolation is clear in her expressionless face and tone, but not everyone speaks of it so flatly. The isolation, in fact, reaches far beyond discussions and to the very heart of student identities. Kim explains how even her personal style at first separated her from her White classmates: “It was kind of like I stood out like a sore thumb with Jordan’s, jeans, and a T-shirt on.” On one memorable day, she recalls how her White classmates called attention to her attire, telling her, “You're dressed like a dyke.” Even now, Kim expresses confusion about that offensive statement, as she remembers her outfit in detail: “Jordan’s ... a black shirt with the sparkly monogram and some jeans.” That was in junior high school, and since then, Kim says she has been through various phases, abandoning her favorite styles for a period of years, and later, much later, beginning to return to wearing the Jordan tennis shoes that she loves. She also shares that she is selective about using slang in her AP classes, noting that she must “always be alert in a lot of situations” so as not to reinforce negative stereotypes of Black students. Ironically, her White classmates use the same slang freely while she exercises caution. At the end of this anecdote, Kim reiterates that it

can be “awkward sticking out like a sore thumb every day.” Kim relates all of this with little expressed emotion, ironically expressing the most visible concern when she repeated her classmate’s use of the slur *dyke*, seeming more uncomfortable about using that word in front of me, her teacher, than about the sacrifices of her identity that she has made merely to assimilate to a predominantly White classroom over the years. Like Kim, Kristen has suffered indignities related to her identity as a Black girl. She had hoped to attend Howard University in the fall and explains that she wants to be surrounded by “like-minded people who actually support me for being me.” Several weeks post-interview when the date for finding out about Howard had passed, I asked Kristen about Howard; she replied with few words and oppressive sadness: “It’s USC.” I had no verbal response, only shared sadness, not merely for her disappointment, but for the identity she may not be able to reclaim. Unlike Kim, Kristen has not staked out a place of respect in the AP environment, nor does she see any possibility of returning to her authentic self.

In addition, the young ladies I interviewed often referenced friends who refused to subject themselves to the loneliness (as well as the frustrations, anger, offenses, etc.) that Black students in AP and honors courses are routinely faced with. Students’ decision not to take an AP course based on these feelings explains, in part, why enrollment has remained low. The social cost outweighs the academic benefits, at least to some students.

Racist statements or acts come from teachers, principals, substitutes, and fellow students. The girls I interviewed repeatedly reference discomfort, anger, frustration, and embarrassment when racial issues emerge in class, either as part of the coursework or in social interactions. The previously noted examples of racism are relatively mild and private compared to the more glaring, overt, and public ones that called up the most

emotional responses from these young women. While they also make references to the larger social structure of the school—social media and the like—the following encounters with racism occurred during the school day and in front of twenty or more classmates, mostly if not all White. Sarah recalls an impactful moment in which a substitute teacher embarrassed her by questioning her place in an otherwise all-White AP class.

I have a hard time telling this story. But I had a sub who [begins to cry, voice trembling] was like you know asked me what I was doing in the class, being the only Black person, being the only junior. It was a fire drill actually, so all of the students in the surrounding classes came to the hallway. They were predominantly Black classes and [the sub] couldn't find the class. Like, the Black students had taken up the hallway and he couldn't see the White students. So he was like, 'Oh, how will I find everybody?' Because we were going outside. And then he looked at me because I was like kind of beside him. So he goes, 'So what are you doing in this class anyway? These Ivy League White children. Ivy League Black girl, huh? Oh, Ivy League, Black Harvard, huh?' Then I kind of looked at him like, [gasps] but once you've had so many of those experiences it's not shocking...< her words are unclear for a moment because of sobs and tears>.

The substitute teacher who singled out and embarrassed Sarah still substitutes at our high school—often. It is worth noting that I have personally heard Sarah tell this story on three separate occasions, with different audiences, but each time, she tells it as if it just happened. The pain of that experience remains fresh, and her tears flow quickly and in abundance.

Kristen also shares a scarring experience, but unlike Sarah, she does not cry—quite the opposite, in fact. Kristen detaches a bit as she relates the story of an AP history teacher embarrassing her by making fun of her natural hairstyle, which I have never personally seen, but has been described to me as “beautiful, abundant curls”:

One day I came into class. I was quiet as a mouse. I didn't say anything but we were maybe about five minutes into the lesson. Mrs. Matthews [pseudonym] stopped the entire lesson. She looks at me and she goes, “[Kristin].... Did you stick your finger in an electric socket before you came in my class today?” And the entire class busted out laughing. And I've never felt so low, so *vulnerable* about being who I truly am. And that just that struck me, like that was a huge part of me just being like you know...forget it...no more curls...I'll just sit here...I'll wear my hair straight all the time.

When I asked Kristen how the teacher reacted to uproarious laughter, she replied, “She laughed with them.” While I anticipated this answer, it was heartbreaking to hear. Adding to this heartbreak is my own observation that Kristin has never worn her natural hair all year; in fact, I have only seen her hair pulled straight back in bun, a hairstyle that hides what another teacher has described as “all these beautiful, glorious curls.” Sarah retold this story in her own interview, unaware that I knew about it, and she further told me that Kristen never, ever wears her natural hair, even during summer break, even when she will only be in the company of trusted friends or family. The damage of that one racist remark has been far-reaching and is deeply engrained. Colleagues and even other students sometimes remark about the behaviors of this teacher, but any suggestion that she may be racist is quickly shut down—by a White teacher or a White student.

From all the interviewees, I learned that a teacher's response is a significant, determining factor in the level and intensity of the emotional response to racist situations. Teachers can be dismissive or even complicit, as Mrs. Matthews was, or they can choose to address racism in ways that support Black students and create teachable moments for White students. Sarah describes her experiences with her junior AP English teacher, Mrs. Morgan, whom Sarah says is "a wonderful teacher. I love her":

If you don't address [racism], it just becomes a bigger issue in the real world. [Mrs. Morgan] made me a better writer. I feel like she addressed a lot of social issues that were very, *very* sticky. It could have put her in trouble. I really do think...like we watched *13th* [the documentary]. My government teacher is scared to show it. I think he's scared to offend them. I really do. And it's more appropriate for his class than any of it.

While Mrs. Morgan is cited in multiple interviews as being a culturally sensitive, emotionally supportive teacher, even her efforts cannot completely shield students from the often toxic social environment of an AP English course. For example, Socratic seminars are watershed moments that often create discomfort for African American students in AP English courses, especially when the Socratic discussion is a graded assignment. According to the popular teacher-resource website ReadWriteThink.org, "The Socratic seminar is a formal discussion, based on a text, in which the leader asks open-ended questions. Within the context of the discussion, students listen closely to the comments of others, thinking critically for themselves, and articulate their own thoughts and their responses to the thoughts of others. The young women interviewed acknowledge the paradoxical nature of such open discussions, which they view as

necessary and sometimes helpful, but also risky and difficult when they involve issues that are social, political, or racial in nature. Again, being alone in these situations makes a clear difference, as Sarah noted about Socratic seminars in her junior AP English class:

Mrs. Morgan was inclusive with her lessons. Everything was great, so she would look forward to Socratic discussions. Well first period, I mean she didn't have ... she had a lot of the same things being said. Kind of one point of view. But seventh period she would look forward to hearing what we [Sarah and the two other Black students in that class period] had to say... Sometimes it's hard to voice your opinion when you're the only...when you're outnumbered because it's kind of like brushed off or it's not listened to. It's not. It doesn't feel like it's valued. And that's why a lot of people are not in these classes and they know that. That's why they don't want to be in the class.

Socratic discussions were mentioned by all four student participants, with mixed reviews. Kim explains that the decision to contribute to a discussion or not can be a tricky one, even systematically outlining the thought process she goes through when race, politics, or anything “scary to talk about” becomes part of an open class discussion:

What goes through my mind is like, okay, step one [she counts these steps off on her fingers and explains them like instructions in a how-to manual]: my main goal is to defend myself. And then next is kind of “how do I do it for myself without being in trouble?” And then branching off of that is “how do I defend myself without being the angry Black girl?” Then from that, it's like “will this teacher write me up [light laughter] if I defend myself?” So. So it's definitely easier for

that to happen when having discussions because you're not really limited to your opinion because an opinion is an opinion.

Kim goes on later to describe Socratic seminars as “necessary, but difficult.” She recalls a specific Socratic seminar in which her class was discussing the Mark Twain novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel riddled with the n-word and other derogatory language, which her White classmates felt all too comfortable using, masked as direct quotations from the novel. Kim further relates that no one was punished for saying racially offensive words or phrases, but were merely reminded not to say them. Despite the difficulty of navigating so many opinions and personal statements, some of which are offensive and even intentionally racist, Erica says that she would encourage students to speak up more:

So I think a Socratic seminar, it's some kind of like an open-minded way to discussing some type of topics. I feel like there's a lot of things they're going to make you uncomfortable but it has to be talked about.

Later, teachers will react to these situations and find themselves re-evaluating a teaching strategy that we all value and look forward to using each semester. Once the racial aspects of this class setting are revealed to us as a group, the confidence in Socratic seminars will shift dramatically and to something more like fear and reservation. Socratic seminars are trendy among teachers who value best practices, but the undercurrent of racism in Socratic discussions is as old as time, as the girls explained to me in their other comments.

And It's Always Been this Way: Generational Cycling of a Decades-Old Problem

*I have been a victim of my own culture because Im trying to conform to you
So even to my own I will never completely be true*

*Sitting back watching your grades drop to an all time low
Because you don't want to appease the thought of being a black student who is
dumb and ghetto*

*Yes I see you rechecking the work that I've done oh so meticulously
I've proven my intelligence multiple times, and you've never had to do the same
with me*

From "A Walk in Our Shoes," an original poem by Kristen

Interviewees' parents experienced these same issues when they were Glenbrook High School students. The shared stories of parents were described as "identical" to their own, sometimes involving the same faculty member or a similar setting. Sarah repeatedly described these as "horror" stories. Her mother, more than thirty years ago, was placed in remedial courses where she did not belong, was spit on by her White classmates, and many other indignities painful to recall. Sarah's mother was recommended for honors classes as soon as she reached junior high school when a teacher recognized her intelligence and questioned her placement. But these stories, horrible as they are, remind Sarah of the treatment she has sometimes received. Kim's parents attended Glenbrook High School as well, where her father was told "he wasn't going to be anything and was just another thug." Sadly, her father has found himself, years later, dealing with racial issues that impact his daughter, who sits in the same classrooms and walks the same halls that he did in the late 1990s. Even family friends, Sarah explains, who went to the same high school decades ago, recall many of the same types of encounters that characterize school life for Kim, Sarah, Kristen, and Erica. As a result, current students understand the struggles they face as ongoing, historical problems that they feel must be endured, as they are unlikely to be addressed, much less solved.

How Do They Do It?

*I even hear the racial remarks not only between your peers but the teacher too
And I'm still yearning to at least be respected as if i am one of you.*

*I've tried everything, from wearing my hair straight, studying endlessly, I've tried
silencing my "blackness" too
And you still degrade me because I am a few shades darker than you*

*Am I not a part of the "no child left behind" policy that has been urged through
and through
Or can we hold on to and also stir towards another derivative of the hashtag "me
too"*

From "A Walk in Our Shoes," an original poem by Kristen

As a White teacher and researcher, I find myself feeling awe and respect for these students and their ability to bear the daily assaults, some subtle and others glaring, that they are met with in AP classes. What are the strategies that keep them afloat in the often toxic world of AP and honors classes? *Silence* is a running theme among the responses of Black AP students. Their anecdotes are riddled with phrases like “keep your mouth shut,” “keep your head down and do your work,” “choose your battles,” and “learn to back off.” Silence is a choice, but one that they exercise out of necessity. Their words carry a different weight because they are Black, and their words are more consequential to people’s perceptions of them than for their White classmates. Recall Kim’s silence as it pertains to slang terms being used, as well as the girls who choose silence in Socratic seminars and other open class discussions. Why? They know that there will be backlash. And they feel they must avoid being perceived as “the angry Black girl,” even if the cost is complete silence. Three of the girls used this exact phrase, and Sarah introduced this stereotype in the context of parental advice:

Your parents will *tell* you to do it [be silent]. Just get through it because when you argue with someone, you're the angry Black person and it's now your fault. So to keep yourself out of trouble, be quiet.

Resilience is another key factor in an African American students' participation in AP and honors courses. While expressed in different words, each participant cited her own resilience as a means to cope with the issues she faces in a predominantly White academic setting. Some of the sources of this resilience are their individual personalities, encouragement from parents, home support, African American classmates, and sometimes even their AP teachers. Recall Kristen's painful recollection of her social studies teacher who invoked the laughter of the entire class by making fun of her natural hair. When I asked her how she was able to persevere for the remainder of the year, Kristen replied,

Like I said, I got a lot of my resilience from you guys [AP teachers/other teachers], so I just...I kept going [tone shifts to exasperated resignation] I just put it over my shoulder—more luggage. But I just kept going [sniffing; crying softly].

And remember Sarah, who along with Kristen, was told that she wouldn't do well in an AP course? Sarah reminds me often of the support she has from her parents and family, "that home support that says, 'Yes, you can!'" even in the face of discouragement at school. More specifically, Sarah credits her mother, who affords Sarah the independence to make her own decisions and to pursue the goals she sets for herself. That support has shaped Sarah's personality, and even on her worst days, like the one when the substitute

teacher embarrassed her by calling her names like “Ivy League Black girl,” she is able to say, confidently but through tears,

You *have to* keep going ... Because if you do take that stuff and quit, it'll never get better and it'll be the same thing over and over. This system of like the school, Advanced Placement classes, is *literally* like society. If you roll over and you don't keep trying, nothing gets better. So, in a way I feel like I have to do this for the people who are in CP. They *can't* do it. It's *not* doable. They're *not welcome*.

Clearly, the resilience these young women have developed is more than a coping strategy to get them through trying times in their own AP classes. Their resilience is—at least in part—a key characteristic in ensuring that other Black students will have opportunities in the future. My current AP students have a clear sense of responsibility—they “know their ‘why’” to use the popular, current lingo. Knowing that “why” is the last piece of this very complex AP puzzle.

Why Do They Do It?

*Ive began to think that this concept has become a practice
Silence me, so my grades drop and thats one less black you'll have in class, sis*

*Or Maybe once you realize your racial depravity,
You'll not only sympathize, but we can bind this social cavity*

*Take a walk in our shoes and maybe we will not only become a tight knit
We will, collaborate, share and engage, creating a true fit*

From “A Walk in Our Shoes,” an original poem by Kristen

Although the social cost and emotional burden are significant factors, the young women I interviewed express few regrets about selecting AP courses. Sarah assessed AP classes as carrying a “*heavy social burden*,” a phrase that she gave strong emphasis.

Kristen admonishes that students must be “*extremely strong*” to bear this burden, and this

warning was her immediate reply to being asked what advice she would give younger students who are considering AP courses. While every student interviewed indicated that they would take AP and honors classes again if given the chance to have a “do over,” they also emphasized that their decision came at a great cost—including lost friendships, emotional stress, and compromised identities. The classes are “worth it” in their words because of the academic gains students received. Also, all students felt that these courses are merely a reflection of larger society, and they see no reason to deny themselves an opportunity in high school when they must eventually face the same racial problems and tensions outside of school—now and in the future.

Furthermore, interviewees all share a notion that their decision to take AP and honors classes is at least partly rooted in a sense of responsibility they feel toward the students who will come after them. They each expressed in their own way that paving the way for others is a significant factor in their choosing to endure the hardships they face. Sarah, in fact, remarked tearfully that she is able to persist despite an onslaught of negativity because of the “CP students” who either do not know that they can do it, or who currently reject AP courses because of the emotional cost of taking them.

The Teachers Weigh In and the Policy Is (finally!) Subjected to Scrutiny

The setting for the focus group discussion of four English teachers in my department, myself included, was an afternoon on which the entire study body had been dismissed at 1:00 for one of our quarterly “Early Out/Collaboration Days.” These afternoons are relaxed, affording instructors the opportunity to work in groupings of our own choosing to collaborate on projects and initiatives that we have created and value. Significantly, this Early Out/Collaboration Day coincides with the completion of

registration for the next academic year, so all four participants have recently reviewed student requests for their courses, and they have also been seeking out students to recruit. For these reasons, the natural beginning of the conversation is teacher reflections on the interventions we have tried in the past, as well as our current efforts to ensure that we are building an inclusive course for the next year.

Knowing that my White colleagues might be anxious to learn what some of their current and former students had to say about how race impacts their choice to take an AP English course, I try to put them at ease for the interview by reassuring them that the students interviewed had been complimentary of their teaching and that they specifically commented on the social consciousness that characterized their teaching. (Later, I would interrogate my own need to put the White teachers at ease about a conversation about race, but that would come later and courtesy of author Robin DiAngelo who recently published the book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*.) At first, the group is a gathering of White teachers only, as Mrs. Jones has shared that she will be a few minutes late, and the Black female administrator who was scheduled to join us has not responded to my recent emails about this focus group meeting. Secretly, I am growing anxious about the possibility that the focus group will have only one Black educator, and this gathering of teachers will mirror the problem that we are here to discuss. Also, I am wondering what Mrs. Jones will think about this dynamic, and I am hoping she will not feel what I am sure she has likely felt many times: all the White eyes trained on her, waiting for her to instruct us about what it is like to be in the minority in an academic setting. She soon arrives, but the administrator never

arrives; so after some small talk about the chaos and excitement of the students on an early dismissal day, we begin our conversation.

Strikingly, but not surprisingly, most of the comments made by the three White teachers touch on very different topics from those made by the four students who were interviewed. The Black teacher in the group connected personally to the summary of student data that all teachers were presented, and even though she graduated high school in 1981, thirty-eight years before our current seniors, her experiences from the 70s and 80s ring true to the current atmosphere in AP classes. While Mrs. Jones was initially included because she teaches 12th grade Honors English and Dual Credit English for seniors, the courses students would take if they did not take AP, her contribution to the faculty focus group became a much more personal one. The experiences she shared, both as a student and as an English teacher, validated the students' observations and placed them within a larger historical context. Summarized below are the findings from the focus group conversation, especially as they compare to the student interviews.

For Teachers, AP Recruitment is about Numbers

Asked to discuss our previous approaches to increasing minority enrollment in AP English courses, AP teachers quickly turn to a discussion of quantitative data, sometimes citing specific numbers. The PSAT Critical Reading score that teachers use as a benchmark is 540, but everyone in this group agrees that accepting students with lower scores is good practice. For many years, AP teachers have been asked by the guidance counselors to “accept” or “deny” students who asked for AP English by examining their most recent PSAT scores and overall GPA. This policy for AP acceptance has been limiting in many ways. First, the only students on our radar are the ones who signed up

because they or their parents made that choice. It does not account for alternate scenarios—that some students may lack the confidence to take AP, may be unaware that they are eligible, or may have even been discouraged from taking it. For that reason, the search for AP students has been broadened for the past four years. Mrs. Roberts [pseudonym], an AP English Literature teacher, notes that teachers have been “widening our scope” by examining “the test scores, the GPAs of the entire junior class.”

There is a strong argument that this strategy has worked: last year, seventeen students who took honors English during their junior year enrolled in AP for their senior year. This increase partly contributed to an increase in African American enrollment in senior AP English, from 11% in the 2017-18 school year to 22% during the current school year. Even so, it is noteworthy that even as teachers are addressing the problem of practice, they are still focused on numbers. Several factors make this approach problematic. All juniors are not required to take the PSAT. All Gifted and Talented (GT) and Honors English students are automatically enrolled for the exam each fall, and the district pays for the cost of the testing. The test is advertised to *all* sophomores and juniors, but actual participation is dependent on several factors that are not traced or measured, such as teacher encouragement (some teachers offer extra credit, some do not) or parental support. On the day of testing, AP and Honors students are tested together in separate locations, such as the media center, while college preparatory (CP) students are seated in larger settings, like one of the school gymnasiums. Since AP and Honors courses are predominantly White, and CP courses are predominantly Black, CRT would strongly suggest that the racism deeply embedded in the fabric of our society is driving these differences, which have a direct impact on a student’s ability to perform well on a

test that will determine their eligibility for academically challenging courses. Broadening the range of scores that are deemed “acceptable” may include more students, but it has not corrected the procedural flaws that discriminate against students based on their current academic placement and by extension, their race.

In fact, at least one of the students interviewed is keenly aware of the testing biases that potentially diminish her in the eyes of the school. Sarah expressed great frustration that it seemed the school overall did not want to see her succeed in AP, which to her is directly linked to test scores:

We literally learn in psychology [that] the tests are not geared for—it's literally geared to make sure that minorities fail.... We speak in certain ways... but the way we would say things, it's not how it would be on the test. So it is literally made that way. There are studies on it. It's psychology you can ask Ms. Hayden [pseudonym]. It's in the textbook.

The irony is not lost on Sarah that one of her courses at Glenbrook High School has taught her just how unfair the selection process is for most of her other courses—just down the hall from where she sits in Psychology (*Advanced Placement Psychology*, no less).

While the school has its own policy and set of procedures for accepting students into AP courses, the College Board policies are broader and more inclusive. The AP Potential page on the College Board website describes many avenues to AP, including but in no way limited to any one numerical score:

And remember, the AP Potential tool gives you just one indicator of your readiness for AP. You may show readiness for AP in other ways — your grades,

your interest in the subject, or your success in earlier courses, for example. Talk to a teacher or counselor about your next steps for taking AP.

How to enact this broad statement in practice has not been discussed by any group in my department, especially as it pertains to student interest. While there is a strong correlation between Critical Reading scores on the PSAT and a passing score of 3, 4, or 5 on the AP English examinations, there are other reasons besides a passing AP exam score to take the course, and we cannot rely on numerical test data *alone* to determine academic placement for students. In addition, the same test biases that exist in the qualifying exam, the PSAT, likely exist on AP exams as well, especially since both exams are written and administered by the College Board. In short, teachers have relied on numbers to tell the story of a student's readiness for AP, but only actual stories can do that.

Teachers Talk about Getting In, not Staying In

Teacher discussions about AP recruitment and enrollment tend to stop at the door of the classroom. Once students are admitted, the concerns are about their ability to perform well academically. AP teachers are concerned about “marginal” students of all races in that we hope students will be appropriately challenged, but also feel that they are adequately prepared. A host of issues enters this discussion. Mrs. Morgan notes that there are deficits within the honors curriculum (at least as it is currently being implemented) that negatively affect students:

In complete and total honesty, we [the 11th grade AP English teachers] don't take in many students from honors and I know that honors and Odyssey should be taught exactly the same. That's how I did it as a ninth-grade teacher... but honors has not been challenging enough. The students don't produce writing and then it

becomes a fear on our part that you're taking kids into an AP program who were very underprepared. And then that becomes discouraging.

A policy or procedural improvement we all agreed on is the need to examine feeder classes for the curriculum and instruction that informs students' preparation for our classes. On this point, student participants also agreed. Sarah reflected on the comments made by her Black classmates who are taking AP English for the first time during their senior year and who took Honors English during their junior year:

They really didn't learn anything last year [in honors English]. What I find a little bit scary is ... like as I look at my peers or some of my friends [and] they don't know. I don't want to say they don't know as much. They don't have a lot of the skills that I think they will need for college. I don't think that they're gonna be in college and just like <gasps> "What is this?" But I think that it's kind of like a disservice to them in a way.

While an AP English teacher like Mrs. Morgan, may express some reservations about accepting these students, Sarah seems to feel that they have benefited from the AP courses they *have* taken, even though the honors program did not adequately prepare them for this experience.

As discussed earlier, Black students often felt that an AP course was challenging, but easier than they had been led to believe in terms of rigor and workload. While teachers spoke of enrollment in AP courses as a one-time, *annual* decision, students focused on the *daily, even hourly* struggles associated with the social environment of AP courses. In order to address the disproportionately low number of Black students taking AP English, we must not view the decision—on the part of teachers or students—as a

single moment in their academic careers, but as part of a continuing educational experience, one for which *we* are responsible. The preparation provided in feeder courses is a key part of this equation, to be sure, but we must also be attentive to the classroom experiences that surround the decision to take AP as well. Like most people who are not directly impacted by a choice, AP teachers often ignore the daily consequences of the decision to take an AP course. The next section discusses the disconnect between teacher and student perspectives of an AP course.

For Teachers, the Decision to Take an AP Course is an Academic One—Only

Given a 10-point summary of the student interview data, the four teachers in the focus group had strong, but very different reactions. The reactions of the White teachers in the room ranged from surprise to shock, and even to shame. What is uniformly true for these White teachers, myself included, is that we have been unaware, for the most part, of the daily problems that go along with taking an AP course. These struggles directly impact enrollment, as captured by the student participants' stories, but until the White AP teachers heard these stories, they were oblivious to them and therefore unable to make the social realities of Black students a meaningful part of their pedagogy.

Listen long enough, and you will hear these White teachers make references to sincere and pedagogically sound efforts to be more inclusive in their curriculum choices and their instructional practices. Mrs. Morgan, for one, notes that teaching Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a staple in the 11th grade English curriculum at all levels, comes with a variety of teaching challenges. Her approach has been effective, as Sarah, Kim, and Kristen all complimented her in their individual interviews on how diverse and inclusive her teaching unit is. Mrs. Morgan surrounds the novel, controversial

for many reasons, with several other texts, including Brent Staples’s “Black Men and Public Space” and the documentary *13th*, which examines racism within the nation’s prison system. Mrs. Morgan describes tying classic works of literature to contemporary social issues, a strategy that has “moved it in a way that...has been really...progressive and the students respond well to, even students who aren’t African American.” Even so, she shares how two students scrutinized *Huckleberry Finn*:

I had two comments this year. We had our final discussion on *Huckleberry Finn*. And one was from an African American girl. Someone saw her reading the book. Someone in the district, like a former teacher [who] said, ‘Wow. *Y’all still read that?*’ And she was like, ‘Yeah.’ And she admitted she wasn’t really getting a lot out of it. And then in the Socratic discussion a White boy said, ‘I feel like this is like all the other books we read about issues with race. It’s a White person dealing with accepting a Black person.’ And I thought...that’s made me feel ashamed... Like that *really is* the way it’s presented [in] the books we pick.

The entire discussion of book selection and teaching of works that deal with race echoed Kim’s remark that these studies and the classroom conversations that surround them are “difficult, but necessary.” Socratic discussions were of significant interest to all of us as AP teachers because it is one classroom activity that we all use—uniformly and consistently. Learning that these are sensitive moments for students caused a similar reaction in all of us: fear and even shame that we had insisted on discussions without perhaps first ensuring that they would be safe emotional spaces for our students. Just as Sarah had noted that in Mrs. Morgan’s classes, the number of Black students in the class could make or break the discussion for her and her friends taking AP, Mrs. Morgan, in

the focus group interview, noted the difficulty of discussing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with only one Black student in the room:

I want to replace [*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*] with something better that has a better message for students... I had, for example last semester, one African American girl in my fourth period. So how do you have a conversation about Twain's vocabulary and Twain's intentional use of a word when she'll have that experience of everyone looking at her? And this semester she's in my fifth period where I have four African American girls and it's wonderful for them because they have strength and confidence in one another and they speak up and they voice their objections. It's so much more productive.

Mrs. Roberts and I could relate to these doubts and misgivings with our teaching of the Richard Wright novel *Native Son*. Although this novel does present the perspective of an African American protagonist (unlike the White perspective described by Mrs. Morgan's students of *Huckleberry Finn*), the discussion of racially sensitive topics can be triggers for all sorts of emotions for Black and White students. The consensus of this group of teachers at the conclusion of the focus group discussion was that we need to rethink this strategy, which has become a centerpiece of our instruction, by seeking training and engaging in further discussions about culturally sensitive approaches to class discussions.

White Teachers Lack Critical Pedagogy Skills

No matter how well-meaning, these White teachers do not have the life experience or pedagogical training to effectively manage the issues that arise in racially imbalanced AP courses. Although the focus group discussion was not meant to highlight the experiences of the Black teacher who joined us to discuss honors and dual enrollment,

Mrs. Jones had an immediate, personal reaction to the student interview summary statements shared with the group. As she began to share personal stories, her role in the focus group immediately shifted from teacher to “teaching the teachers.” She became, for the White teachers in the group, the colleague and friend who had also once been the very student who was underserved, overlooked, and misunderstood. She gave us both flashbacks of her own experiences and a flash forward to what our current students may one day reflect on and feel. Timewise, Mrs. Jones represented the long continuum on which the problem exists, and she powerfully spoke to both student *and* teacher perspectives, beginning with the feelings of isolation the girls had shared.

All four student participants referenced loneliness and isolation, a feeling that Mrs. Jones instantly recalled, especially since she was the first child in her extended family to begin school in a fully integrated school. Mrs. Jones reflects thoughtfully, recalling for us the instructions her parents gave her about her interactions with White classmates and teachers in a newly integrated school:

From the beginning, there's the conversation of what's going to happen to you:

“We're gonna have this conversation because this is what's going to happen to you in the cafeteria; this is what's going to happen to you in the classroom.” And so I was groomed to be alone.

Mrs. Jones believes that parents no longer hold these conversations with their school-aged children, but that to some degree, students no longer find themselves completely alone, which fosters confidence and provides support, but also leaves them unprepared when they are in fact the *only* Black student in a class. Just as the girls had predicted, across the board, that the racial issues they face in AP classes will follow them beyond

high school and throughout their lives, Mrs. Jones parallels the isolation of being the only Black *child* in a classroom to the isolation she felt again as an *instructor* who was the only Black person in a classroom of GT English students:

I became so accustomed to being the only African American in the room that there was a point where I didn't necessarily even think about it until someone made it obvious for me. And that was the case in [gifted and talented English], when I looked up one day from the podium and realized, I'm the only Black person in here. So there is that sense of isolation when it dawns on you.

Mrs. Jones also related directly to the girls' observations that the messages they receive about themselves are clear, if subtle. Some of these messages come from teachers or classmates who make them feel academically or socially inferior, and some of them are signals that they are somehow meant to become the voice of all African Americans.

While those messages are not typically voiced, they *are there*. Mrs. Jones describes this social phenomenon well: "I don't think they ever said it out loud necessarily but when I look back on it, I *heard it*." Mrs. Jones speaks these last two words slowly and with great emphasis, and the effect of them hangs in the air for a few silent moments after she has finished speaking.

Even the students' sense of responsibility for one another and for the students who will follow them in the AP program was echoed in Mrs. Jones's own experiences. Her reflections on her own personal history parallel what the four girls I interviewed shared, but Mrs. Jones expresses the burden of responsibility from the distance of many years and with the wisdom she has gained from deep reflection of what it meant for her to open doors for others:

It's such a very heavy responsibility. In Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, his mother tells him, "The one thing I will not give you, son, is the Black tax." And growing up as I did ... you were going to understand that your role in this classroom was to make it possible for the next person to do as well or better. You had to do this because you were opening doors. And if you didn't do it, it wasn't just about what was happening to you in that classroom. It was about everybody who was waiting on you to make it possible for them to take the next step. And that's *very* burdensome.

Thus, the historical perspective that Mrs. Jones brings to this discussion serves to underscore the pervasive nature of the girls' experiences, and this pervasiveness is a quality highlighted by CRT. Her perspective also brings to light the longstanding, secretive nature of our school's role in perpetuating racial imbalances in academic placement.

The Policy that Drives AP Lacks Transparency

A surprising, and admittedly unpleasant revelation about academic placement at our high school emerged during our discussion and uncovered a great deal about the unfair placement practices that student interviews also revealed. As a researcher, a challenge I faced while examining the problem of practice was the inability to locate documents related to policy. While I know well the procedure that has long been used by AP teachers to determine a prospective student's acceptance or denial status, I cannot produce a policy statement, list of instructions, or even an email that describes it. Only in retrospect have I realized that I was instructed in person, one-to-one, with only a list of potential students that included their PSAT scores (Critical Reading and Math) and their

overall GPAs. The cut-off score at that time was 50, and the minimum GPA was 3.50. In addition, I was instructed to circulate the list to the students' current English teachers and ask for a simple "yes" or "no" for a teacher "recommendation." This system is riddled with flaws, but it is especially problematic for minority students. A test score alone raises serious concerns, as Sarah noted in her recollection of the testing biases she learned about in Ms. Hayden's psychology class. In addition, CRT says that stereotype threats compromise the validity of standardized test scores used as indicators of ability and potential for success (Steele & Aronson, 1995). In the faculty focus group, Mrs. Morgan and Mrs. Roberts described the ways in which we have tried to cast a wider net to include more students, including efforts to "talk to them, email them, [get] to them somehow to make sure they know the invitation is there," in the words of Mrs. Roberts. What these practices have in common is that they have been *informal* efforts, sometimes performed individually, but most often as a team of two AP teachers who share the course load for an AP English course. None of these efforts is written down, formalized, or universally practiced, so while we have made some headway in appealing to and including more Black students, our efforts lack the structure and power of written, departmental or schoolwide policy.

Mrs. Jones added a bit of history, as she taught GT courses many years ago when AP English Language and Composition was added to the list of AP courses offered at our school. She describes her course syllabus as including documentation of cut-off scores required for enrollment in AP English and being "called to task" for such transparency. She was presented with a copy of her own syllabus, specific enrollment criteria highlighted on the copy, and grilled about who gave her the information. Further, she was

told to remove it because “it was just going to depend.” Without any clear documentation of the scores and grades required for enrollment, teachers and counselors could use their own personal judgment to enroll a student—or not. Given the pervasiveness and furtiveness of racism, such loose advertisement and application of admission standards is highly problematic. The course outline descriptions, even today, do not list specific guidelines for being admitted to AP courses, as the following excerpts from the 2018–19 course catalog indicate:

AP ENGLISH III Language and Composition (11th grade/AP): This year-long course offers selected juniors the opportunity to develop their writing skills and awareness of style and rhetoric through critical reading and composition practice. It focuses on expository prose in both reading and writing. Students who enroll in this course MUST take the Advanced Placement Examination. The exam fee will be paid by the state.

AP ENGLISH IV Literature and Composition (12th grade/AP): This year-long course is the culmination of the most advanced program of study in language arts. It focuses on composition and analytical skills through study of the short story, poetry, the novel, and drama. Students who enroll in this course MUST take the AP English Examination. The exam fee will be paid by the state.

Thus, the undefined, highly subjective process by which a student “qualifies” for an AP course has allowed racial bias to control the narrative for student’s academic lives. The decision to enroll a student in AP, or any other course for that matter, often rests in the hands of a single teacher, whose biases may be unacknowledged, much less addressed. Erica’s experience in a neighboring district with a teacher who did not

consider her 97 average to be sufficient to recommend her for an honors course, is suggestive of the lack of transparency that blocks access to rigorous courses for minority students. The teachers who told Sarah and Kristin that they were not ready for AP-level work and probably would not do well, expressed opinions that were not supported by anything specific, so it is impossible to determine the basis of those assessments. The interventions that AP teachers have used have been based on a system whose very foundation is ambiguous, questionable, and easily manipulated. While we have tried, sincerely but naively, to increase the enrollment of African American students in AP English, we have been trying to do so within a “system that’s broken, but it’s normal”—a realization that the teachers in the focus group only made during the discussion that took place at the focus group meeting.

There is one provision for students who request AP English but are not admitted: an appeals process that involves taking an abbreviated version of the AP examination. As with every other part of AP policy, problems with the appeals process abound. The process only applies to students who request the course, and many Black students will never do so, for the mountain of reasons that have already been cited here. If a student does request the course and receives a rejection notice based on test scores, GPA, or teacher recommendation, he or she often feels diminished by the letter, which is sent from the guidance department of the school. A White parent who works in the district shared with me that the letter was daunting and discouraging, and once his daughter received it, she had little confidence moving forward. Having participated in this process for many years, I know that only about half of the students who receive an initial denial letter will appear to take the AP appeals test. The test consists of two critical reading

passages and about 25 multiple choice questions, along with a free response essay question. The unwritten policy about this appeals test is that the student must score 50% correct or higher and receive a score of 5 or higher on the College Board scale of 1 to 9 used to score free response questions on the AP exam. The scoring of the essay is subjective, as most essay grading tends to be.

Essentially, the benchmark set for admission into the class is the same one to pass the AP exam, so if a student does not have the potential to score at least a 3 on the AP exam (which they do not have to take for another year, *after* taking the course), then they do not qualify for admission. While I have not used this appeals process for several years, it had been common practice for a long time, and it remains an option open to AP teachers at our school. The appeals process is unfair, subjective, and based on unrealistic expectations, but it has been used systematically to keep students out of AP English. No student, to my knowledge, ever received the results of their appeals test. No records were kept about the gender, race, or socioeconomic class of students who registered for AP, were initially denied, took the appeals test, or were denied again. I can think of no way to reconstruct this data or to determine the extent to which students were discriminated against based on any factor, including race. In fact, I recently found my old “acceptance lists” from years ago while I was purging the files in preparation to move to a new classroom, and these rosters include names, test scores, GPAs, and a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in a column marked “teacher recommendation.” Were the old, cryptic policy (a loose application of this term) in place, we would have even fewer students of color in our AP classrooms, as I no longer believe that all students were meant to survive this culling process.

While none of the teachers in the focus group discussed using the appeals process or any part of the old acceptance policy, we all still use remnants of it and have merely adapted it to create a new recruitment practice that is more equitable than what had been done before. While the AP English Literature class this year is 22% African American, nearly double what it has been in the past, the class for the upcoming school year is 11%, demonstrating clearly that the changes to our recruitment practices do not produce consistent or lasting results.

Summary

The students I interviewed have a sharply different view of AP enrollment from the teachers who not only instruct the classes, but also determine who will take them. Black students must factor in a very complex, racially charged social atmosphere and select courses knowing that there will be isolation, microaggressions, and even overt racial offenses. Teachers, on the other hand, concern themselves with test scores and other numerical data, which they innocently believe are the best indicators of future AP success. For them, the AP experience is about ability and readiness, but they seemed unaware of the reality that no part of the process, from identification to retention, is equitable for Black students.

Furthermore, the students interviewed have a fuller awareness of the macro setting in which their academic lives occur than their instructors do. While AP teachers make sincere attempts to address social issues like racism in the curriculum they present, we are still largely unaware of how racism plays itself out in our own classrooms, or in the classrooms our students visit before and after they visit us each day. Students, on the other hand, not only endure daily insults, rejection, and loneliness, but they are acutely

aware that the racism they face each day is the same racism they will face in their lives beyond high school. It is woven into the stories their parents tell about the past, their own stories of today, and the stories yet to be told of their interactions in the future.

Observations about the historical and social context of racism in education repeat themselves in the experiences of these four girls and in the student and teaching experiences of the African American teacher in the focus group; yet, the three White teachers in the focus group made far fewer remarks about this context. While they acknowledge that these connections exist and even build lessons about racism into the curriculum, the lack of personal connection is a clear divide between students and teachers. The surprise felt by all three AP teachers about the potential for harm during Socratic seminars is the prime example of this disconnect.

Both students and teachers seem vaguely aware that there is little transparency about the policies that drive AP enrollment. Students feel sure that they are more capable and prepared than they are told, but with teachers holding the deciding power and having little accountability for the process, student and their parents have little recourse to address the problem.

Finally, and most importantly, the revelations of the student interviews indicate that the *culture of our school* is permeated with racism that is daily enacted by faculty members and students alike. Racist acts, attitudes, and statements have damaging, long-term effects on Black students, but they are not reported, addressed, or corrected. While the stories shared by the students and the fears expressed by the teachers pertain to a specific problem of practice—participation in AP English—they are in no way limited to English courses. The problems and “horror stories” affect *every* aspect of life at our

school. CRT says that racism is deeply woven into the fabric of this entire nation, and our school's deep racial division bears out the truth of this theory in a disturbing, pernicious way. Addressing our enrollment issues in AP English will not happen in a vacuum because the racism that drives our deficits in enrollment and our neglect of retention issues also do not occur in a vacuum.

Chapter 5

Unpacking the Luggage and Disrupting our Current System

Through the lens of Critical Race Theory [CRT], this critical ethnography explored the disproportionately low number of African American students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) English courses at Glenbrook] High School by comparing the perspectives of four black AP English students with those of three White AP teachers. The purposeful sample of students included four, African American seniors who were all enrolled in AP English for their entire senior year. The sample of faculty members included four teachers, three who teach AP and one who teaches Dual Credit and Honors, to capture the thoughts about recruitment and placement from teachers at multiple grade levels and from multiple placement perspectives. The significance of the study lies not only in its exploration of issues of racial equity, but also in its examination of a decades-old problem within the school being studied. As an AP teacher, I have discussed and informally addressed this problem for over 15 years. I find that I cannot let go of it, nor will it let go of me, either. In some ways, I feel that even though this study is coming to an end, my experiences confronting these issues are just beginning.

At the time of writing this document, the school district has just announced in an official press release that it will begin pursuing a “broad-based, data-driven diversity, equity and inclusion effort from within [the district] and in collaboration with partner organizations across [the county]” (as reported in the local paper). At this important

transitional—and one hopes, *transformational* moment in our district’s history, this research study focuses on one manifestation of racial inequality in the high school. The following points summarize the findings of my data analysis.

The Problem is Self-Perpetuating

One of the most disheartening conclusions of this study is that the problem with AP enrollment and recruitment is a vicious cycle. Student participants frequently referenced their friends and family members who do not even consider taking an AP class because they do not see themselves represented there. As a result, fewer students sign up for AP courses, and when we have few black students this year, we are likely to have few the next year and the next. “Representation matters”—it is a phrase that is becoming commonplace in society today, and yet the lack of representation continues to underpin the entire problem. While this conclusion is disheartening, it should not be surprising. CRT is built upon the harsh reality that racism is deeply embedded into every aspect of society and that institutional racism is self-perpetuating by design (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Castagno, 2014). The generational aspect of the racism that my students encounter is a telling manifestation of this truth. Another clear indicator lies in the way students described their peers’ reluctance to take classes in which their race is underrepresented or not represented at all. The current enrollment demographics both reflect a racially biased system established in the past and forecast continued discrimination if the current system is not disrupted. Consequently, working within the existing “broken system” is not a viable option.

Numbers Don't Tell Stories; Only Stories Can Do That

The AP teachers who participated in this study can quickly identify strategies that have been used to cast a wider net for AP enrollment, but these strategies invariably involve a narrow set of numbers: PSAT scores, GPAs, and the like. While we uniformly recognize that we must use a broader range of “acceptable” test scores, even lowering the minimum score for enrollment does not address the “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Castagno, 2014) owed to African American students. Furthermore, this strategy has been simplified to a mere lowering of the cut-off score, without any logical or research-based understanding of how scores should be interpreted to allow for testing biases, stereotype threat, and opportunity gaps that inform those scores in the first place. The body of scholarly literature based in CRT is clear: standardized tests do not reflect the abilities of minority students; even worse, through harsh realities such as stereotype threat, these assessments seriously disadvantage students when used as gateways to programs and opportunities in education (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Ford (2013) asserts that the minimally acceptable inclusion of minority students is a known percentage, even outlining the method for calculating it with “Ford’s equity formula for minimal representation goals” based on the Office of Civil Rights 20% rule (pp. 68-69). She further recommends examining the standard error of measurement (SEM) for any intelligence test or standardized test to determine the range of scores that represent a student’s actual score (Ford, 2013). Notably, numbers like Ford’s (2013) equity formula are not part of the recruitment process; instead, faculty members are solely using numerical data that is more likely to maintain the status quo than to increase minority enrollment in AP English.

Even with this observation, I am still dealing with numbers, and numbers are incomplete indicators *at best*. Ford's (2013) approach to inclusion in Gifted and Talented (GT) and AP programs includes a variety of sources for fully understanding a student's potential: school counselor referrals, parent/family member referrals, and even self-nominations. Each of these perspectives offers a different narrative, or sometimes counternarrative, about a student's abilities, interests, and needs, and most of this information cannot be captured by a number. The grossly simplistic referral system used at Glenbrook High School (a simple 'yes' or 'no' from the previous year's teacher) offers no perspective or narrative *at all*, and its usefulness is no greater than a simple numerical value attached to a test score. Furthermore, a "good" test score is not necessarily an indicator of a student's interest or motivation to take a more rigorous English course, and any instructor would acknowledge that there is a strong, positive relationship between these qualities and student achievement. Ask any teacher of an elective course, and she will quickly explain the differences in behavior, work ethic, and achievement when students *want* to take the course. Moreover, in the larger, national debate about standardized testing and its appropriate use in public education (a controversy that encompasses all students in the American public education system) responsible educators must consider the compounded, negative effects on students of color, for whom the very *act* of taking a test in the presence of negative racial stereotypes can present a significant obstacle to meeting eligibility cutoff scores (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Ford, 2013). Standardization inherently involves the use of cookie-cutter standards and assessments, which CRT says are structured to favor White students, and the use of data-driven decision-making, which also favors normalized Whiteness:

Standardized educational approaches fail to account for the vastly different histories and contexts of schools, students, and communities, and as such, naturalize patterns of success and failure. When these patterns are naturalized and made to seem normal, Whiteness thrives and students get left behind. (Castagno, 2016, pp. 129-130)

The student counter narratives I collected illustrate, among other things, that numbers are misleading, in part because they only tell a small portion of a story. Numbers in no way help educators to understand the social environment that informs a black student's choice to take an AP class. "Qualification" defined by numbers, especially under a racially biased system, does not reflect a student's past experiences, complex identity, or desire to subject herself to the social burden of toxic Whiteness. Numbers also limit educators' thinking about student needs to the single focus of eligibility and tempt us to ignore the social realities that shape an African American student's experience in an AP course. Milner (2012) argues that "standardization, in many ways, is antithetical to diversity" and "advance[s] a sameness agenda when the playing field for many students of color...is anything but even or level" (p. 694).

Instead, educators (especially GT and AP teachers, whose programs are often difficult for Black students to access) should remove barriers by deprioritizing numeral data like test scores and exploring other outlets for identifying capable, interested students whom we can then recruit to scholarly programs. CRT's emphasis on storytelling and naming one's own reality is reflected in the College Board's advice to prospective AP students on the AP Central website to talk to their teacher or counselor about taking an AP course, including a four-page "Conversation Starter" document with

questions for students to consider before and during a discussion with a faculty member at their school (“AP Students”). For this strategy to be effective, teachers must be prepared to hold productive conversations, rather than perpetuating the discouragement and biases that have marked teacher interactions with students of color in the past. We must be prepared to listen to students’ counternarratives about their educational experiences. Delgado (1989) suggests the power of counterstories lies in their ability to challenge the “prevailing *mindset* by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is” (p. 2413). Ladson-Billings (1999) centers her research and writing in the view that storytelling is “important in truly understanding [people’s] experiences,” not only as a “methodological tool,” but as a way of knowing and understanding people in the context of society (p. 219). Likewise, Milner (2007) echoes the vital importance on valuing narratives and “naming one’s own reality” (p. 391), a cornerstone of CRT. While stories, especially counternarratives, are indisputably important to the understanding of people of color in an oppressive society, student stories rarely enter into the decision-making process that determines the outcome of their academic and social lives. When teachers make decisions without knowing students’ personal narratives, but rather accept or deny them on a purely data-driven basis, the racial injustices that characterize every aspect of American life are bound to be perpetuated in this process. Changing this procedural injustice could prove to be transformational for all students, but especially for students of color.

Literature Is a Necessary but Problematic Approach to Diversity

Another well-intended but misguided strategy that AP English teachers at Glenbrook High School have implemented is the inclusion of more diverse texts. The

intentional addition of novels like *Native Son* by Richard Wright, plays such as August Wilson's *Fences*, and documentaries like *13th*, represents our desire to create a more inclusive AP English curriculum. Teaching works in which a black protagonist persists in the face of ruthless racism introduces a variety of social justice issues connected to institutional, systemic racism in our country. What the student participants brought to light is the problematic nature of adding these works without first anticipating the reactions of White students and preparing ourselves to deal with the racial tensions, questions, and conflicts that will likely result in the classroom. To do so requires help—a deliberate and thorough professional development in culturally sensitive pedagogy. The students' experiences illustrate the complex paradox of studying these works: the conversations that arise from the study of works with race-based conflicts are “necessary but difficult,” in Kim's words. While students reported that they were glad that these works were addressed, they also shared the frustration, anger, and embarrassment that can ensue when their White classmates respond negatively. Realistically, teachers cannot control every reaction, nor should we, but we absolutely must be prepared to create emotionally supportive learning environments for our students and we must be equipped with teaching strategies that promote greater understanding and personal growth for White students with limited understanding or resistant personalities.

Ford (2013) describes the limitations of this strategy in her discussion of Banks' multicultural infusion model, a four-tiered pyramid of multicultural curriculum inclusion that is “designed to ensure cultural rigor and engagement” (pp.190-191). The AP English teachers at Glenbrook High School operate between the second and third tiers, which are Additive and Transformational, a place where we are caught, but need to move beyond.

Each year, we have deliberately added texts that represent a more diverse set of authors including gender, race, political affiliations, nationality and other characteristics. While we have also used teaching strategies that cross over into the next highest tier, Transformation, there is more work to be done here. Ladson-Billings (1999) also makes this important distinction by noting that “multicultural content” is not sufficient to claim that one has a multicultural curriculum or a culturally sensitive program (p. 220). In fact, it is all too easy for White teachers, in a system in which Whiteness has been normalized, to make claims to a multicultural literature curriculum while still maintaining the status quo of a fundamentally Eurocentric curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1999). While increasing the diversity of our curriculum in AP English is a much-needed reform, it will not bring more students to the program and may even add tension and anxiety to AP English for Black students. Boutte (2016) says that books “should serve as mirrors in which students can see their lived experiences reflected in a positive way” (p. 63). Achieving this ideal brings our AP program a step closer to one that Black students want to be a part of, as opposed to merely signing up for. That classroom atmosphere is the subject of the next summary statement from this study.

A “Heavy Social Burden”—“More Luggage”

Missing from educators’ comments in the focus group interview was anything more than a minimal awareness of the social environment in our classes, one that our black students are acutely aware of and have learned to endure daily. While English teachers occasionally experience their own discomfort when racial issues are thematically linked to the literature we teach, we are rarely aware of racial microaggressions or other subtle forms of racism—subtle *only* to us. Phrases like “a heavy social burden” and “I

just put it over my shoulder—more luggage” characterize the experiences of AP students at our school, but the emotional weight these young women describe is a common theme in scholarly literature. Ladson Billings and Tate (1995) describe a pattern among high-achieving African American students, like the ones I interviewed: “students’ academic success [comes] at the expense of their cultural and psychological well-being” (p. 475).

Historically, the problem we are dealing with as educators revisits the failings of *Brown v Board of Education (Brown I)*, or more accurately *Brown II*. In *Brown I*, the Supreme Court declared, “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” but moving black students to new schools populated with White children only changed their location, not their circumstances (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Schools and classrooms that are “racially blended,” especially those that are *predominantly* White, can—and typically do—constitute de facto inequality (Tate, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Carter Andrews, 2009; Carrol, 2017). The persistence of this problem is clearly demonstrated by the similarities among the experiences of Mrs. Jones (pseudonym) as the first in her family to attend integrated schools, the girls’ parents who attended Glenbrook High School in the 80s and 90s, and now the student participants themselves, all graduating in 2019. Legal scholar Charles Lawrence (1980) “points out that Black children suffered injury not because they were sitting in classrooms with other Black children, but rather because they were in those classrooms within a larger system that defined them...as inferior” (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Numerous comments and anecdotes shared by the four student participants reflect this harsh reality for Black students, including their references to having to prove themselves daily and the unspoken yet clearly communicated claims that they are not good enough.

However, the realities that students are deeply aware of, generally go unnoticed or unacknowledged by their instructors. Ford (2013) throws the problem of teachers' myopic view of the plight of African American students in predominantly White academic settings into sharp relief with her Recruitment and Retention Conceptual Model (p. 5). Ford (2013) likens recruitment to desegregation and retention to integration, where "desegregation is quantitative and physical" and primarily concerned with "percentages and numbers" (p. 5). By contrast, Ford (2013) notes, "The other half of this equation is retention (integration), which is qualitative and pertains to the socioemotional climate" (p. 5). The learning environment of a classroom is central to the retention/integration half of the equation includes "relationships, expectations, nonverbal messages, experiences, supports" among other factors mentioned frequently in interviews with student participants, but noticeably absent from comments made by AP instructors in the focus group discussion (Ford, 2013, p. 5). The gut-wrenching, heartbreaking, and infuriating stories shared by the four girls I interviewed fell heavily on this side of the equation, while the instructors focused more on recruitment. While we did mention instructional and curricular choices meant to modify the learning environment, we did so with a hazy understanding (at best) of what that entailed. Ford (2013) goes even further:

What is the rationale for identifying and placing gifted students if we don't do what is necessary to keep them in gifted education to appropriate services and associated opportunities? Accountability and our professional integrity are questionable and compromised when we focus on recruitment but ignore retention. (Ford, 2013, p. 6)

Educational scholars know something essential to this problem that the faculty of my high school does not: professional development tailored to White teachers and focused on culturally responsive teaching is an essential, even vital element of any GT or AP program that fosters a learning environment concerned with retention and integration (Ford, 2103; Ladson-Billings, Boutte, 2016; Milner, 2015).

Fostering Resilience and Negotiating Silence

The stories shared by the students in this study underscore what past research has established time and time again: that resilience is the hallmark of a Black achiever in a predominantly White academic environment (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Carter Andrews, 2009). These students report that their reliance comes from a variety of sources, including their parents, classmates, and teachers—even White teachers, whose support is crucial even if there is a significant mismatch between their students' life experiences and their own (Milner, year; Haddox & Price-Dennis, 2013; Carol, 2017). Student resilience, from the narratives the girls shared, seems linked to their silence. Remaining silent in the face of racism is a way to maintain their peace of mind in class and avoid being labeled as “the angry Black girl.” Breaking their silence comes at a great cost to them—academically and socially—but their White teachers may not necessarily share or even feel that risk. As Kristin observed, it was her White teachers who helped foster her resilience when they boldly confronted racism in class. While she felt that she could not risk the backlash from her classmates, her White teachers certainly can, without personal or professional risk, leverage their Whiteness and use their White privilege to offer a new perspective to White classmates (Castagno, 2014).

CRT places significant power in the ability to name one's reality and share one's narratives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2007) but silence works to counteract this power (Castagno, 2014). Ironically, White teachers may view their silence as a function of "niceness" and necessary to polite interactions in classrooms when in reality, their silence fuels and perpetuates racial divisions, rather than healing them as they erroneously believe (Castagno, 2014; DiAngelo, 2018). DiAngelo (2018) cautions that silence is far from polite, but rather perpetuates the broken systems we all operate within: "my silence is not benign because it protects and maintains the racial hierarchy and my place within it" (p. 58). Whiteness promotes silence as it pertains to race and condemns the mere mentioning of race as impolite or bad because of the discomfort it may cause other White people (Castagno, 2014; DiAngelo, 2018). Teachers are in no way immune to these social mores (Castagno, 2014). While the silence that Black students practice and the silence that White teachers practice are motivated for different reasons, the two forms of silence frequently meet in the predominantly White classroom. AP English teachers must check our own inclination toward silence in the face of racial issues in order to challenge and transform the socially adverse learning environment that Black students face daily. No matter how progressive or well-meaning we may believe ourselves to be, when teachers are silent, we become complicit in racism, limit our effectiveness as teachers, and fail to disrupt the racially biased system that we are part of.

Practice Recommendations

First, the English teachers at Glenbrook High School must acknowledge that the current system of academic tracking (for which the two AP English courses are culminating classes) is a broken one and that it systematically disadvantages African

American students. Knowing this, we must examine new ways of guiding students toward appropriate course selections, especially those that may better prepare students for college, inflate student GPAs through grade weighting, and make students' transcripts more attractive in the college admissions process. Part of this process will include prioritizing data other than test data and working to learn students' stories instead of merely looking at their testing profiles.

Secondly, the White teachers who participated in this study are well-meaning instructors, but we must equip ourselves with a deeper knowledge of what it means to be White, including the biases, perspectives, and beliefs that limit our understanding of the deep implications of racism in our society, and by extension, our own classrooms. We need to explore resources, such as Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, in order to learn more about how we respond to situations, like a Socratic situation, in which racial issues are discussed. By understanding our own clouded perceptions—and those of our White students as well—we will be better able to respond and facilitate when the time comes. Most importantly, we will be better equipped and motivated to *listen* to Black students' counternarratives. As teachers, we need to seek professional development opportunities that guide us toward the Transformational Approach that Ford (2013) describes, one that does not merely add works by a diverse group of authors, but also tears down and rebuilds the curriculum in a way that is fundamentally different from the historically Eurocentric one we have always used. Our professional development should also lead us to a greater awareness of the social environment in our classrooms, and this heightened awareness should then guide us to create a learning atmosphere that honors and celebrates everyone's cultural capital.

In this effort, we must pay attention to silence as much as we pay attention to what people say because silence—both teacher and student silence—has been weaponized against Black students. When teachers choose silence, we support the cause of an oppressive system, and when we enable the silencing of Black students, we rob them of the single greatest gift a teacher can give her students: the power and agency to advance their own citizenship in a more socially just world (Freire, 1970). While our African American students, as demonstrated time and again by the student participants in this study, have all the resilience and power they need to succeed in any setting, we should not perpetuate an academic program that so unjustly requires them to carry a “heavy social burden.” Instead of giving them “more luggage” to carry, more social burdens to bear, we should be lightening their loads, welcoming their voices, and facilitating them in achieving their potential.

Limitations of the Study

Although the data collected from this study provided much-needed insight and beneficial conclusions, the scope of this study was more limited than I had originally planned. Soliciting the cooperation and participation of administrators proved more difficult than I had hoped, and I was therefore unable to include their perspective. Through both student interviews and informal conversations I had with various people associated with the school district, I also came to realize that parent voices also need to be included in studies about our school programs. Not only do parents have shared experiences that add valuable insight to our understanding of the school’s racial problems, but they also have strong, heartfelt feelings about the classes that their children take, the academic paths that these classes place them on, and their children’s overall

well-being at school. If my study could have been bigger and broader, I believe that the voices of administrators and parents might have granted an even deeper reflection for the study's conclusions.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study began as an interrogation into some failed interventions of the past into a serious, persistent problem of practice: the traditionally low enrollment of Black students in the two AP English courses offered at my high school. In that pursuit, the natural and socially conscious place to begin was the narratives of Black AP students who chose to take these courses, when so many of their qualified Black classmates did not. The stories of these four girls was absolutely the right place to go for the knowledge and understanding that open up windows of insight into the social injustices of our high school. As the study moved toward its conclusion, however, another area of study emerged as highly relevant to the solutions I seek: Whiteness studies. Keeping the voices and stories of African American students at the heart of it all, I now firmly believe that the White teachers at my school will scarcely make progress in this or any other area of campus life at our school until we examine ourselves as White people and confront what our race means to our attitudes, behaviors, and decisions, especially as those pertain to our teaching lives. The writing and studies of Angelina Castagno (2014) and Robin DiAngelo (2018) provide a starting point for developing an understanding of Whiteness that could then underpin a study of the White faculty at our high school and how our Whiteness shapes the school, its culture, and the outcomes for our students of color. From these resources and others, a logical next step in researching this problem of practice would be to examine the faculty at Glenbrook High School through the lens of critical

Whiteness studies. Examining the ways in which we are complicit in perpetuating and enabling a broken system through our attitudes, treatment of students, and decision making, I strongly believe that future research could move us toward a more equitable learning environment at all levels, but especially those like AP courses that have been historically imbalanced.

Summary

Several meaningful patterns emerged during the data collection for this study. First, the lack of representation of Black students in AP English is a problem that feeds itself. Secondly, AP teachers have prioritized numerical student data in harmful ways; instead, we should be engaging in meaningful conversations with prospective students and their parents. As the stories of the girls who participated in this study show, a variety of factors contribute to the AP program being predominantly White, but we will only find solutions by focusing on the narratives of students of color in order to challenge and disrupt a racially biased program. Thirdly, attempts to implement a multicultural literature study in AP English must not be additive only, but must be transformational and culturally sensitive. Fourth, the social atmosphere of a predominantly White academic setting is riddled with conflict for Black students, and most of it occurs under the radar of White teachers. To students, the social aspect of AP courses is persistently burdensome. Finally, amidst all the toxicity of the social environment, Black students achieve and thrive because of their own resilience. The cost? They often silence themselves to keep their peace of mind. Sadly, White teachers may be silent as well; however, we can contribute meaningfully to a more positive social environment by

naming racism when we see it and by teaching in a culturally sensitive manner that acknowledges the cultural capital of *all* students.

The teachers involved in this study have worked hard to achieve several goals, including actively recruiting students of color, amending the AP curriculum to include multicultural literature, and directly addressing racial topics related thematically to literature as part of class instruction. The three White teacher participants in this study are like-minded and well-meaning instructors who have diligently, even passionately pursued meaningful solutions to the enrollment deficits related to race for our AP English courses. We have even seen improvements during some academic years, but these results have not been repeated in subsequent years.

As much as we may not care to admit it, the one factor we have never examined in the equation is perhaps the most obvious: *us*. We have often examined black student enrollment and our inclusion of black authors in the curriculum, but we have never seriously examined our own Whiteness (Castagno, 2014; DiAngelo, 2018). DiAngelo (2018) argues that “if I am not aware of the barriers you face, then I won’t see them, much less be motivated to remove them” (p. xiii). The stories shared by the four student participants bring AP teachers face-to-face with the barriers that have been created through Whiteness. It is our responsibility to remove the barriers, challenge those who would maintain them, and create equitable paths to the AP program for all students.

References

- Alkebulan, A. A. (2007). Defending the paradigm. *Journal of Black Studies*, 37(3), 410–427.
- AP Students. (2019). *Choosing your AP classes*. Retrieved from <https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/choosing-courses>.
- Baber, L. D. (2012). A qualitative inquiry on the multidimensional racial development among first-year African American college students attending a predominantly White institution. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 81(1), 67–81.
- Banks, J. A. (1993). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. *Review of Research in Education*, 19, 3–49.
- Banks, J. A. (1998). The lives and values of researchers: Implications for educating citizens in a multicultural society. *Educational Researcher*, 27(7), 4–17.
- Berliner, D. C., & Glass, G. V. (2014). *50 Myths and lies that threaten America's schools: The real crisis in education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Boutte, G. S. (2016). *Educating African American students: And how are the children?* New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carol, S. A. (2017). Perspectives of 21st century Black women English teachers on impacting student achievement. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86(2), 115–137.

- Carter-Andrews, D. J. (2009). The construction of Black high-achiever identities in a predominantly White high school. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 40(3), 297–317.
- Castagno, A. E. (2013). Multicultural education and the protection of whiteness. *American Journal of Education*, 120(1), 101–128.
- Chilcott, L. (Producer), & Guggenheim, D. (Director). (2010). *Waiting for “Superman”* [Documentary film]. Los Angeles, CA: Paramount.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2003). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- College Board. (2014a). *The 10th annual AP report to the nation*. Retrieved from <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/10th-annual/10th-annual-ap-report-to-the-nation-single-page.pdf>.
- College Board. (2014b). *English literature and composition course description*. Retrieved from <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/pdf/ap-english-literature-and-composition-course-description.pdf?course=ap-english-literature-and-composition.pdf>
- Conger, D., Long, M. C., & Iatarola, P. (2017). Explaining race, poverty, and gender disparities in advanced course-taking. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 28(4), 555–576.
- Cook, L. S., & Amatucci, K. B. (2006). A high school English teacher’s developing multicultural pedagogy. *English Education*, 38, 220–244.

- Corra, M., Carter, J. S., & Carter, S. K. (2011). The interactive impact of race and gender on high school advanced course enrollment. *The Journal of Negro Education, 80*(1), 33–46.
- Dana, N. F. (2013). *Digging deeper into action research: A teacher inquirer's field guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, SAGE Publications.
- Dana, N. F., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2014). *The reflective educator's guide to classroom research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, SAGE Publications.
- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review, 87*(8), 2411–2441.
- DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Efron, S., & Ravid, R. (2013). *Action research in education: A practical guide*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Elhoweris, H. (2008). Teacher judgment in identifying gifted/talented students. *Multicultural education, 15*(3), 35–38.
- Feagin, J. R., & Sikes, M. P. (1994). *Living with racism: The African-American middle-class experience*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- Fisher, E. J. (2005). Black student achievement and the oppositional culture model. *The Journal of Negro Education, 74*(3), 201–209.
- Ford, D. Y. (2013). *Recruiting and retaining culturally different students in gifted education*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

- Ford, D. Y., Harris, J. J., & Schuerger, J. M. (1993). Racial identity development among gifted Black students: Counseling issues and concerns. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 71*, 409–417.
- Ford, D. Y., Moore III, J. L., & Scott, M. T. (2011). Key theories and frameworks for improving the recruitment and retention of African American students in gifted education. *Journal of Negro Education, 80*(3), 239–253.
- Fraenkel, J. R., Wallen, N. E., & Hyun, H. H. (2015). *How to design and evaluate research in education*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill Education.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Gary Orfield documents the resegregation of America's public schools. (1999). *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 24*, 48–49.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Glenn, W. (2012). Developing understandings of race: Preservice teachers' counter-narrative (re)constructions of people of color in young adult literature. *English Education, 44*(4), 326–353.
- Griffin, K., & Allen, W. (2006). Mo' money, Mo' problems? High-achieving Black high school students' experiences with resources, racial climate, and resilience. *Journal of Negro Education, 75*(3), 478–494.
- Haddix, M., & Price-Dennis, D. (2013). Urban fiction and multicultural literature as transformative tools for preparing English teachers for diverse classrooms. *English Education, 45*(3), 247–283.

- Harris, R. (2012). "Purpose" as a way of helping White trainee history teachers engage with diversity issues. *Education Sciences*, 2, 218–241.
doi:10.3390/educsci2040218.
- Hemmings, A. (1996). Conflicting images? Being Black and a model high school student. *Anthropology & Educations Quarterly*, 27(1), 20–50.
- Henfield, M., & Washington A. (2012). "I want to do the right thing but what is it?": White teachers' experiences with African American students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 81(2), 148–161.
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. (2005). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Howard, T. C. (2003). "A tug of war for our minds": African American high school students' perceptions of their academic identities and college aspirations. *The High School Journal*, 87(1), 4–17.
- Howard, T. C., & Navarro, O. (2016). Critical race theory 20 years later: Where do we go from here? *Urban Educator*, 52(3), 253–273.
- Hughes-Hassell, S., & Cox, E. J. (2010). Inside board books: Representations of people of color. *The Library Quarterly: Information Community, Policy*, 80(3), 211–230.
- Iatarola, P., Conger, D., & Long, M. C. (2011). Determinants of high schools' advanced course offerings. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(3), 340–359.
- Iwai, Y. (2013). Multicultural children's literature and teacher candidates' awareness and attitudes toward cultural diversity. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 5(2), 185–198.

- Jeong, D. W. (2009). Student participation and performance on Advanced Placement exams: Do state-sponsored incentives make a difference? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 31*(4), 346–366.
- Jones, L. (1978). School desegregation in retrospect and prospect. *The Journal of Negro Education, 47*(1), 46–57.
- Ketter, J., & Lewis, C. Already reading texts and contexts: Multicultural literature in a predominantly White rural community. *Theory Into Practice, 40*(1), 175–183.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1999). Preparing teachers for diverse student populations: A critical race theory perspective. *Review of Research in Education, 24*, 211–247.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2004). Landing on the wrong note: The price we paid for Brown. *Educational Researcher, 33*(7), 3–13.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the educational debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher, 35*(7), 3–12.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47–68.
- Lamont, M., & Lareau, A. (1988). Cultural capital: Allusions, gaps, and glissandos in recent theoretical developments. *Sociological Theory, 6*(2), 153–168.
- Loewus, L. (2017). The nation's teaching force is still mostly White and female. *Education Week, 37*(1), 11.
- Marsh, K., Chaney, C., & Jones, D. (2012). The strengths of high-achieving Black high school students in a racially diverse setting. *Journal of Negro Education, 81*(1), 39–51.

- McBride-Davis, C. A., Slate, J. R., Moore, G. W., & Barnes, W. (2015). Advanced placement exams, incentive programs, and cost effectiveness: A lack of equity and excellence for black students in Texas, New York, and Florida. *The Journal of Negro Education, 84*(2), 139–153.
- Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational settings: Wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas. *Oxford Review of Education, 33*(1), 1–17.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Milner, H. R. (2005). Developing a multicultural curriculum in a predominantly White teaching context: Lessons from an African American teacher in a suburban English classroom. *Curriculum Inquiry, 35*(4), 391–427.
- Milner, H. R. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. *Educational Researcher, 36*(7), 388–400.
- Milner, H. R. (2012). Beyond a test score: Explaining opportunity gaps in educational practice. *Journal of Black Studies, 43*(6), 693–718.
- Milner, H. R. (2015). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Press.
- Moore, G., & Slate, J. R. (2008). Who's taking the advanced placement courses and how are they doing: A statewide two-year study. *The High School Journal, 92*(1), 56–67.

- Nettles, M. T., Millett, C. M., Douglas, D. R., Ludwig, J., & Forman, J. (2003). Attacking the African American–White achievement gap on college admissions tests. *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 6, 215–252.
- Noble, R. (2011). Mathematics self-efficacy and African American male students: An examination of two models of success. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 2(2), 188–213. Retrieved from http://diversity.utexas.edu/black-male-education-research/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Mathematics_Self_Efficacy_and_African_American_Male_Students.pdf.
- Ogbu, J. (1978). *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Pine, G. J. (2009). *Teacher action research: Building knowledge democracies*. Washington, D.C.: Sage Publications.
- Posselt, J. R., Jaquette, O., Bielby, R., & Bastedo, M. N. (2012). Access without equity: Longitudinal analyses of institutional stratification by race and ethnicity, 1972–2004. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(6), 1074–1111.
- Prendergast, C. (1998). The absent presence in composition studies. *College Composition and Communication*, 50(1), 36–53.
- Pyke, K. D. (2010). What is internalized racial oppression and why don't we study it? Acknowledging racism's hidden injuries. *Sociological Perspectives*, 53(4), 551–572.
- Roberts, R. A., Bell, L. A., & Murphy, B. (2008). Flipping the script: Analyzing youth talk about race and racism. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 39(3), 334–354.

- Rothschild, E. (1999). Four decades of the advanced placement program. *The History Teacher*, 32(2), 175–206.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Sanders, M. G. (1997). Overcoming obstacles: Academic achievement as a response to racism and discrimination. *Journal of Negro Education*, 66(1), 83–93.
- Skerrett, A. (2009). Biographical orientations to secondary English teaching within a mosaic context of diversity. *English Education*, 41(3), 281–303.
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60–73.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Ornelas, A. (2004). A critical race analysis of Latina/o and African-American advanced placement enrollment in public high schools. *The High School Journal*, 87(3), 15–26.
- Southworth, S., & Mickelson, R. A. (2007). The interactive effects of race, gender and school composition on college track placement. *Social Forces*, 86(2), 497–523.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797–811.
- Stroub, K. J., & Richards, M. P. (2013). Resegregation to reintegration: Trends in the racial/ethnic segregation of metropolitan public schools, 1993–2009. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(3), 497–531.

- Tate, W. F. (1997). Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. *Review of Research in Education, 22*, 195–247.
- Tatum, B. D. (2017). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Taylor, L. K., & Hoechsmann, M. (2011). Beyond intellectual insularity: Multicultural literacy as a measure of respect. *Canadian Journal of Education, 34*(2), 219–238.
- Tillman, L.C. (2002). Culturally sensitive research approaches: An African American perspective. *Educational Researcher, 31*(9), 3–12.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “Big Tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*(10), 837–851.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2018). *Characteristics of public elementary and secondary school teachers in the United States: Results from the 2015–16 National Teacher and Principal Survey* (NCES Publication No. 2017-072rev). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Wallace, M. (2013). High school teachers and African American parents: A (not so) collaborative effort to increase student success. *The High School Journal, 96*(3), 195–208.
- Warikoo, N., & Carter, P. (2009). Cultural explanations for racial and ethnic stratification in academic achievement: A call for a new and improved theory. *Review of Educational Research, 79*(1), 366–394.
- Wasserberg, M. J. (2017). High-achieving African American elementary students’ perspectives on standardized testing and stereotypes. *Journal of Negro Education, 86*(1), 40–51.

- Whiting, G. W. (2006). From at risk to at promise: Developing a scholar identity among Black male adolescents. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 17*, 222–229.
- Wildhagen, T. (2011). Testing the “acting White” hypothesis: A popular explanation runs out of empirical steam. *Journal of Negro Education, 80*(4), 445–463.
- Yokata, J. (1993). Issues in selecting multicultural literature for children and adolescents. *Language Arts, 70*, 156–167.
- Yonezawa, S., & Jones, M. (2006). Students’ perspectives on tracking and detracking. *Theory Into Practice, 45*(1), 15–23.
- Yoon, B., Simpson, A., & Haag, C. (2010). Assimilation ideology: Critically examining underlying messages in multicultural literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 54*(2), 109–118.
- Yosso, T. J., Parker, L., Solórzano, D. G., & Lynn, M. (1998). From Jim Crow to affirmative action and back again: A critical race discussion of racialized rationales and access to higher education. *Review of Research in Education, 28*, 1–25.