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The Underrepresentation of Black Males in Advanced Courses

Jacquelyn Ortner

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THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF BLACK MALES IN ADVANCED COURSES

by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all of the brilliant students whom I have taught over the years, for motivating me to pursue excellence and equity; and to my parents, Terry and Trudy Ortner, for cultivating my love of learning and for their unwavering support of all my personal, professional, and educational endeavors.

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to examine the forces that impact Black male enrollment in advanced courses at an urban public high school in the southeast. In two rounds of one-on-one interviews and two focus group sessions, qualitative data was collected from students who were currently enrolled in advanced courses as well as from students who had been identified as gifted but were not currently enrolled in advanced courses. Data was coded inductively using constant comparative analysis. Emergent themes included problems with the marketing and incentivizing of advanced coursework; irregularities in the notification and advisement process; participants' self-perceptions of being the "odd one out;" their mostly strong, positive academic self-perceptions; their varied relationships with peers and adults on campus; the microaggressions and implicit racism they have perceived; and the complexity of culturally relevant pedagogy. The findings suggest a need for teachers to advocate for students in the identification and advisement processes; to build supportive and connected classroom communities, particularly in advanced classes; to honor the uniqueness of each student and avoid essentialization; and to build relationships with students in order to support students academically and socioemotionally, as well as to better inform their own curriculum and pedagogy.

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Chapter 1:

Nature and Significance of the Problem

I grew up in a predominantly White, predominantly upper-middle-class section of a small city. In high school, I was an honors and Advanced Placement (AP) student in every course where that was an option. I encountered almost no students of color during my own four years of taking those higher-level classes. Obviously, other factors contributed to the segregation at my high school—for one, segregation of the town at large made school zoning segregation a given. However, at the high school where I now teach English 19 years later, our student body is not monochromatic. Based on the most recent district demographic report, our student body is 46% White, 41% Black, and 13% other races.

The demographics of any subset of a larger student population would ideally reflect the demographics of the larger population. However, the racial make-up of our advanced courses (an umbrella term I will use to include Advanced Academic Programs [AAP, also known more simply as honors courses], AP and International Baccalaureate [IB] classes) is overwhelmingly White. This disparity is not exclusively a problem in my school or in my district; data reveals that this is a national trend (Chatterji et al., 2021).

Brown v. Board of Education theoretically desegregated schools in 1954; however, the high school where I work did not fully begin to grapple with integration until the seventies, after a brief closure because of racial tensions in 1970 (White, 2006).

Now, 52 years later, the school enrollment at large reflects racial diversity, but a walk down the hall and a peek into classrooms will reveal segregation within this integrated school. Advanced classes are predominantly White; College Preparatory (CP) classes are predominantly Black. I have spent the entirety of my 14-year teaching career at this school. I was disturbed by this phenomenon when I began my career, and I have not seen marked improvement since then.

I think, for example, of my enrollment in 2018-2019 in my AP English Literature & Composition Class. In a school where students of color are in the majority, 10 of my 41 students (24%) were students of color – again, this in a school where students of color are in the majority. Of those 10, only 2 were Black males – 2 of 41. In 2019-2020, I saw more evidence of the same pattern. In English II Honors, I had 50 students total. Only 13 of those 50 (26%) were students of color. Only 3 of the 13 were Black males. In AP Literature, I taught 21 students total. Two were students of color. None were Black males. In 2020–2021, I had three students of color in my AP Literature class out of 29 students total. All three were female. In 2021–2022, I had two students of color in my AP Literature class of 21 students total. Only one was a Black male.

I always request a balanced schedule of advanced classes and CP classes because I enjoy teaching a diverse swath of our student population. This combination has afforded me the opportunity to get to know many brilliant young people of color who were eligible for advanced courses but have opted never to pursue that path at our school. I find this trend more acute with Black males. Three in particular always come to mind. One student, now 27, is a father of four and recently became an Army officer; he still expresses regret that he did not choose an advanced course path that would have made

obtaining a four-year degree easier. Another, now 26, dropped out at 17 after having been expelled twice. He was recently paroled on a murder charge and is now back in jail for drug and weapons charges. A third, 19, graduated last year after a one-year dropout period during what would have been his junior year.

When I think of these three young men, I cannot help but wonder *What if?* What if they had chosen advanced classes? What if they were able to envision themselves belonging in a world of academic achievement? What if they had felt more comfortable and supported in nurturing their academic potential? What about their environments — social, familial, academic —made them feel as if they did not belong in advanced courses? What could we —teachers, guidance counselors, the school as a whole —have done to encourage and support them?

Problem of Practice

My problem of practice is the underrepresentation specifically of Black males in advanced courses. Black males as a demographic subgroup are particularly marginalized in the academic world. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that Black males are more likely to be expelled, more likely to be classified as needing special education, more likely to drop out, and less likely to be enrolled in gifted classes than any other demographic subgroup, and those trends have persisted for decades (NCES, 2019b). This overarching pattern implies a troubling disconnect between what Black males bring to the school building and what schools are doing to maximize their potential. Particularly for students who not only possess ability but also possess extraordinary academic potential, how can we help mitigate barriers to participation and achievement in advanced courses?

The underrepresentation of students of color in advanced courses is not a problem unique to my school, my district, my city, or my state; research bears out this pattern on a macro level (Chatterji et al., 2021; NCES, 2019a; Grissom & Redding, 2016; NEA, 2017). Nationwide, we have heard talk of the “achievement gap” for decades. More recently, the same concept is frequently referred to as an “opportunity gap.” I am interested in Ladson-Billing’s (2006) recasting of the phrase as the “education debt.” This progression of language is significant, both denotatively and connotatively. That there has never been talk of an “ability gap,” only an “achievement gap,” is worth noting. Students of color are not inherently less capable; rather, some force(s) seem to mitigate their potential to achieve. The shift to “opportunity gap” implies that schools or society or both may be failing to provide students of color with the same educational opportunities as their White counterparts. And Ladson-Billings’s choice to employ the word “debt” is of particular interest, as it implies that we owe students of color better: It charges us to make up for lost and/or denied opportunities. Of course, we can only begin to repay that “debt” if we first explore how those opportunities were and continue to be lost and/or denied.

One related issue is that of the stereotype threat, which suggests that if a student feels marginalized or inferior due to some stereotype about an identity group to which they belong, their performance will suffer. Furthermore, “As this threat persists over time, it may have the further effect of pressuring these students to protectively disidentify with achievement in school” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). This threat has implications for student motivation and for academic assessment, raising interesting questions not only about the performance of Black males in advanced courses, but also

about the very criteria used to identify them as gifted, which often relies almost exclusively on test scores. My district policy states that in order to qualify as gifted, students must satisfy certain performance levels on nationally normed tests; academic performance alone is not enough (see Appendix A).

Similar to that self-defensive “disidentification” (Steele & Aronson, 1995), Tatum (2005) explained a style of detachment that he called the “cool pose” (p. 28), used defensively to “to cope with oppression, invisibility, and marginality...cope with conflict and anxiety...[and] manage [one’s] feelings of rage in the face of prejudice and discrimination” (p. 29). This type of detachment or defense mechanism may be an underlying explanation as to why some Black males, despite their actual giftedness, might shirk that label.

Other areas for consideration that focus more on curriculum and pedagogy include the degrees to which the “hidden curriculum of Whiteness” (Allen, 1999) as well as microaggressions (Ford et al., 2013) detract from the sense of belonging in a classroom for any gifted student of color. One National Education Association (NEA) study conducted in 2017 listed significant factors that can negatively impact the performance of “culturally and linguistically diverse” students; findings include “preferred learning styles,” “lack of access to academically successful role models,” “lack of culturally responsive assessments,” and “stereotypic or lower expectations of teachers and family” (pp. 14-15). Certainly, these areas warrant further investigation, particularly as they would produce those exact conditions that Tatum (2005) identifies as triggers for defense mechanisms in Black males: “oppression, invisibility, marginality...conflict and anxiety” (p. 29).

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation is undergirded by critical race theory (CRT). CRT was initially a legal framework, but Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) saw significant potential in its application as an educational framework. CRT has distinct applications in terms of action research methodology. Both the basic tenets of CRT —legal and educational —and its methodological implications will be discussed in this section.

The key points of CRT include the ideas that race and inequity are inextricably linked; that our society rests upon property rights and “Whiteness [is] the ultimate property” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58); and, finally, that the link between race and property offers an analytical framework from which to critique society in general and school in particular. Accordingly, critical race theorists challenge counterproductive perspectives such as “neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 56).

Critical race theorists take into consideration the ways that racism is rooted in the very founding of our country, when enslaved Africans were treated as property and White slave owners held all of the power. Much of early American government dealings focused on property rights; therefore, from its very inception, American law was premised on privileging White owners and objectifying enslaved Africans, who were treated as pieces of property (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theorists explore how these early developments are still impacting current systems and institutions —in other words, the perpetuated link between racism and inequity. For example, inequity and property rights are still inherently linked to the way school funding is allocated via property taxes. Another example of the link between racism, property, and

school is embodied in the scenario that has played out at my school: The concept of property rights seems to factor into advanced courses, which have been the domain of White students.

One common methodology in educational CRT action research is that of sharing counternarratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT places high value on experiential knowledge and in lifting the voices of people of color (Solórzano, 1997). The ideal function of counternarratives is to make larger points, indicate larger patterns, and critique society—not just as storytelling in and of itself (Ladson-Billings in Dixson & Anderson, 2018).

Given many recent high profile police killings of unarmed people of color and the resulting heightened racial discourse, educators now stand – perhaps more so than ever – poised to effect significant further conversation and *change* with CRT as a framework. Using CRT as a tool for reporting and discussion is not enough; CRT must be used to “agitate and advocate for meaningful outcomes that redress racial inequality” (Dixson & Anderson, 2018, p. 122). Paradoxically, the recent outcries against CRT make it all the more relevant: We must acknowledge how race is constructed by society and how that construct impacts society within a society that may want to deny that truth.

A secondary theory that informs this work is that of identity formation. Identity formation theory as applied to high school students would typically revolve around Erikson’s (1968) stages of industry vs. inferiority and identity vs. confusion. A CRT lens reveals why these stages could become sticking points for Black males, a class of individuals who are made to believe—in ways large and small, both inside and outside the school building—that their very identity makes them inferior. Furthermore, in

conjunction with CRT, Erikson's (1968) earlier stages of trust vs. mistrust and autonomy vs. shame & doubt become complicated when students habitually learn to mistrust the very institutions through which they must carve a path. Cross et al. (1991) outlined specific steps of racial identity formation that are helpful in framing this problem.

To develop this link between identity formation and school, as seen through a critical race lens, research topics will include first a historical examination of the deficit perspective and counter perspectives that help shift the view – from viewing the source of the problem as situated within Black male students and their culture to acknowledging that the source of the problem is actually a complex interaction of societal forces and institutions. Other topics will include the process of gifted identification in my setting and how stereotype threat works as a barrier to that process; Black male identity formation; and an exploration of Black male perceptions of themselves, their teachers, and the institution of school.

Research Questions and Purpose

The problem of practice for this study is the underrepresentation of Black males in advanced courses at my school –a problem that persistently plagues not only my own school but also U.S. education in general. I aim to answer the following questions:

1. What factors deter gifted Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced courses?
2. How can teachers mitigate some of those factors through curriculum and pedagogy to better serve gifted Black male students?

The first question was designed to draw from the voices that matter most –the primary sources: Black males who are currently enrolled in gifted courses, and Black

males who may be eligible for those courses but have chosen a different path. Drawing upon the details of their stories, I attempted to find patterns and commonalities in their experiences to answer the second question. These two questions were designed to move the conversation toward solutions after establishing problematic patterns. Overall, my research aim was to find some ways that my school and potentially my district can mitigate the forces that lead academically gifted Black males to disidentify with their own giftedness.

Researcher's Positionality

I have both insider and outsider positions in relation to this problem. I am an insider in my organization, where I spoke with students, teachers, and guidance counselors. Even so, sharing insider status does not mean our roles and our experiences are the same; even with insiders, “there is merely one truth among many” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 41). Specifically, as a teacher with both advanced and CP level courses, I am an insider with a unique vantage point that allows me to recognize the difference in rigor and culture between these two tracks. However, in my work as a researcher with this group of students, I am doubly an outsider in that I am not male, and I am not a person of color. I cannot presume to know what it feels like to struggle with academic identity or masculinity, to be a minority in a classroom, or to feel ostracized in the way that some of these students have indicated that they do. I anticipated some of these students might be hesitant to speak with candor because I am a representative of the institution that often makes them feel marginalized. Remaining sensitive to these positionalities, I attempted to frame my research with regard to “equity, ethics, and social justice” (CPED in Ma et al., 2018, p. 15) and to have obtained “a ‘broad’ view which is

macro-oriented and emphasizes empowerment and social action” (Zuniga-Urrutia in Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 54).

Study Design

My beliefs align with Efron and Ravid’s (2020) assertion about the beliefs inherent in qualitative action research: “Schools are complex, socially constructed institutions that comprise multiple realities...[and] the meaning assigned to school experience is varied, shaped by individuals’ subjective interpretations, and influenced by their personal, cultural, and historical background” (p. 45). I have also chosen action research over more traditional methods because I believe that students are the real stakeholders in this study, working in conjunction with me – they are not merely data points for me. As a 14-year member of my school’s faculty, I am deeply committed to our school community and to changing the culture of our school to serve all students more equitably, capitalizing on their diverse strengths.

Qualitative research was the most appropriate path for this study because this study is not a question of numbers; time and time again, quantitative research has revealed that this problem exists and persists. For me, the real questions are qualitative: What does this problem look like in practice from the perspective of the students? What patterns emerge when we explore the lived experiences of gifted male students of color? And why does this problem exist and persist? I wanted to invite students, some of whom may feel disenfranchised because of their experiences with the institution of education, into their role as voices in a conversation that might lead to some recommended solutions. Their counternarratives to the overarching narrative of gifted education can provide deep and meaningful context to the larger patterns of discrimination and

marginalization at play. Students' counternarratives have the potential to be more impactful than any quantitative research could ever be; after all, "The structure of the story is built into the human mind...it is largely through narratives that humans make sense of and express their understanding of events and experiences" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 76). Because of my CRT framework, a data set consisting of rich student voices was fitting.

My school is situated in a fairly small, affluent pocket of a large metropolitan area. The school's attendance zone draws from a wide variety of neighborhoods, socioeconomically speaking. According to the most recent district demographic report, 45% percent of our student body lives below the poverty line. The racial make-up of the student body is 46% White, 41% Black, and 13% other races.

Participants of my study are Black male students at my school. I drew from two different subgroups of participants: (a) Black males currently enrolled in advanced courses and (b) Black males who exhibit gifted ability but who are not currently enrolled in advanced courses. In keeping with the theme of CRT, I featured these student voices and counter narratives in a critical examination of school culture and students' academic experiences.

Because I was looking for those very specific subgroups within a much larger student population, I relied on purposive sampling. I relied on administrators, guidance counselors, and our AP coordinator for access to test scores and state giftedness eligibility data. I also used teacher input to help me narrow down my participant pool by identifying students already enrolled in advanced courses who might be particularly open to discussion, as well as to identify names of students whose test scores they felt might

indicate gifted potential. I recruited a handful of students whom I already knew, hoping that I would get more openness and honest answers from them. I expected openness to be more challenging for the students with whom I would cultivate a transactional relationship exclusively for this dissertation. In one instance of snowball sampling, a student I knew recruited another student for me.

My goal was to recruit eight students, with the expectation that a few would decline to participate and/or would leave study in some other way (e.g., moving/transferring schools). I hoped to work with a group of six. Out of fear of reluctance and attrition, I went overboard by speaking to 13 students. Nine agreed to participate and brought back signed letters of consent. One recruited another student. All of them expressed an eagerness to participate, so I did not feel comfortable eliminating any of them – hence the larger-than-initially-intended sample size of 10. This larger pool also helped me meet my initial goals of including students from each grade level and drawing from the two desired groups: students who are currently and are not currently enrolled in advanced courses.

I gathered data from these students during one-to-one, semi-structured interviews – two per participant, so 20 total – and through two focus group sessions, although those sessions were hard to arrange and not well-attended. The initial interviews ranged from 15–30-minutes; the second-round interviews were shorter and mostly used for follow-up and clarification. Interviews were semi-structured, which allowed me to move in different directions if I (or participants) felt pulled to do so. I relied heavily on experience/behavior questions, feeling questions, and opinions/beliefs/values questions (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 107).

My goal was for the two focus group sessions to last about a half hour each. However, they only lasted about 15 minutes each, and only half of my participants attended. I had developed general topics/questions for the focus groups, but I expected the conversation to flow a bit more organically there than in the one-on-one interviews. This prediction did not hold true.

I developed protocols for both the interviews and the focus groups, and I shared them with the students. I recorded audio during all sessions, but I kept brief notes during them as well. Notes included major topics/patterns I noticed, follow-up questions that occurred to me, and important quotes/points, but I also made some notes about tone and body language as Efron and Ravid (2020) suggested , which were helpful as I strived to provide thick description of my participants and their experiences.

Student voice was paramount here. Both one-on-one interviews and focus groups gave students the freedom to express their opinions (in the presence of their peers and without), helping me to understand their perceptions and experiences and to seek their opinions on how to address my problem of practice since their lived experiences are at the heart of the problem.

Keeping extensive notes on interviews and focus groups as well as creating transcripts of those sessions provided me with a wealth of data to comb through. I followed the qualitative data analysis steps of “breaking down the data into parts, organizing it into codes, and identifying recurring constructs and categories” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 167). Out of a desire to amplify student voice and bracket my own understandings of students’ experiences, I did not pre-determine codes and categories; I relied on emergent coding, letting students’ voices highlight issues and overlap to

illuminate themes for me.

One way I ensured both transparency and ethical consideration was through member checking as needed (defined in Herr & Anderson, 2015; discussed as a key concept when it comes to ethics in Klehr, 2012). Maintaining extensive documentation, including notes and audio recordings, helped. I provided thick description of my setting and my participants, “allow[ing] the audience to authentically perceive the participants’ views and ‘enter’ into their world by seeing, hearing, and sensing their experiences...to better understand [my] interpretation of the data, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the study” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, pp. 76-77). I anticipated that a unified approach — the theoretical framework and multiple voices/perspectives — would provide proof of process validity and democratic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Regarding ethical considerations, I endeavored to honor the key principles of “respect for persons, beneficence, and justice” (Pritchard, 2002, p. 8). Keeping these principles in mind, I had to work through a few areas of concern. The first such area was that of anonymity. I wanted to provide thick description of my participants without jeopardizing their anonymity. Pritchard (2002) noted this same concern:

The qualitative data more common in practitioner research are usually more difficult to detach from the subjects’ identities than are quantifiable data, because vignettes, quotations, and other forms of authentic representation of qualitative data reflect indications of the sources’ identities. (p. 6)

My decision to use focus groups complicated this further, as they represent an environment “where anonymity is virtually impossible and others besides the researchers are present; these other people’s discretion is also necessary to preserve confidentiality”

(Pritchard, 2002, p. 6).

My second area of concern was recruitment and consent. I worked to make sure that participants and their parents were aware of the purpose and methods involved in the study so that their consent was “informed, competent, and voluntary” (Pritchard, 2002, p. 5). Each parent received not only a letter and a consent form (see Appendix B), but also an email or a phone call from me as well as an invitation to a parent information session via Zoom one evening.

My third area of concern was that of my own positionality as a White woman. In fact, my positionality as a White female was the main reason why I wanted the consent process to be as open as possible in order for both students and parents to understand the intent behind my research: my desire to work towards improvement, not just to fulfill the requirements of a degree program. My positionality also contributed to my desire to be intentional about the ways in which I represented and honored Black male students’ voices and experiences. I wanted to build rapport and trust with students so that they were comfortable talking to me. I used member checking (Herr & Anderson, 2015) throughout the process as an ethical practice to ensure that I was not misrepresenting student voices.

Lastly, I wanted to make sure that I did not treat my participants as objects of study. My project revolved around this concept. They were creating narratives and inquiry alongside me. I wanted to make sure I honored that as part of my process. Through interviews, focus groups, and member checking, I was sure to emphasize this stance explicitly: “When practitioner research involves the active participation of the subjects, that process includes ongoing, experience-based opportunities for the subjects to develop their competence in understanding research, thereby becoming more informed,

competent subjects” (Pritchard, 2002, p. 10).

Significance

As explored previously, the broader implications of this problem are far-reaching. The data reflects that this underrepresentation is a nationwide problem, requiring reflection, dialogue, and action on the part of all stakeholders. Advanced courses are linked to weighted GPA, which is linked to college admissions; advanced coursework challenges students to a level of rigor that prepares them for the college classroom (Singleton et al., 2008). In these ways, enrollment and engagement in advanced classes can play an influential role in a student’s college admission and performance, which is ultimately linked to earning potential. This problem becomes an issue of representation in institutions of higher education and, long-term, a contributing factor to the larger system of economic and social inequity for people of color.

The aim of my study was to open a dialogue on the local level that would help point to both problems and solutions for Black males who are enrolled in advanced courses, and for those who could be enrolled in those courses but have chosen not to be. Herr and Anderson (2015) explained that “rich descriptions of local practices are valuable and meet criteria for possible transferability to other settings” (p. 91), so, by providing thick description of my own school setting, I wanted to provide a model for how dialogue and possible solutions can be initiated and sustained where similar conditions and demographics exist. If we aim to level the proverbial playing field, then all stakeholders —teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators —must be involved in the recruitment and retainment of Black males in advanced courses, and they must be aware of the barriers that hinder those processes.

Limitations

As the study progressed, a few limitations became clear. First, some students did not seem to notice the racial demographics of their CP classes. Therefore, their perception of the situation did not necessarily match mine – reinforcing the need to bracket my own understandings. That being said, all students who had been enrolled in advanced courses at any time did notice the racial disparity therein; while they may not have had the vocabulary to articulate their thoughts about the forces at work, they were nonetheless able to speak their counternarratives.

Second, as mentioned previously, the focus groups were not well attended. A mid-year lunch schedule change may have exacerbated this outcome. Whatever the reason, I did not find that the focus group sessions were nearly as fruitful as the one-on-one interviews, nor were they nearly as fruitful as I had hoped they would be.

Third, as I had anticipated, the students with whom I did not have pre-existing relationships were a bit more reticent than the students whom I already knew. Some of those students did eventually seem to feel more comfortable, sharing more openly. Two in particular remained more closed off.

Summary

This chapter examined the problem of the underrepresentation of Black males in advanced courses on both a hyperlocal and a national level. It detailed how CRT and identity formation theory undergird the approach of this research. It outlined topics to be explored in the literature review and presented a plan for data collection through action research. Subsequent chapters will examine data gleaned from those two sources – scholarly literature and, more importantly, the voices of the students themselves.

Keywords/Glossary

African American and **Black** are used interchangeably in this dissertation to refer to students who are both coded as Black in our school database and self-identify as such.

Advanced courses is an umbrella term which signifies courses taken at one of the following levels: honors, Advanced Placement, or International Baccalaureate.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical approach that posits an inherent link among race, inequity, and property.

Giftedness is a term defined via state and district policy which both lay out specific qualifiers based on both test scores and academic performance (see Appendix A).

Chapter 2:

Review of the Literature

The demographics of any subgroup would ideally reflect the demographics of the larger population from which that subgroup was pulled. However, the racial make-up of advanced courses (honors, AP, and IB classes) at the school where I teach is overwhelmingly White.

My problem of practice is the underrepresentation of Black males in advanced courses. Educational trends have shown for decades that Black males are at increased risk for negative outcomes (e.g., expulsion, referral to special education, dropping out) and are less likely to achieve more positive outcomes (e.g., enrollment in advanced classes) (NCES, 2019b). To investigate this pattern and foster Black male potential, I aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What factors deter gifted Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced courses?
2. How can teachers mitigate some of those factors through curriculum and pedagogy to better serve gifted Black male students?

Overall, my aim was to find some ways that my school can mitigate the forces of “oppression, invisibility, [and] marginality” (Tatum, 2005, p. 29) to better serve academically gifted Black males.

Literature Review Methodology

In my search for sources, I relied almost exclusively on the ERIC and Academic Search Complete databases through the University of South Carolina library system. I focused my search on peer-reviewed journal articles and frequently cited studies. As I read research studies and articles related to my topic and selected theories, I became familiar with the “big” names, seminal works, and hallmark studies that I was then able to locate and use myself. Additionally, I relied on some course texts from previous courses on diversity and race, and on my own professional library that already contained several relevant resources.

Crafting a literature review allowed me to gain historical perspectives on this issue; to build a knowledge base of related terms, theories, and concepts; to examine causes and effects of this issue; and to compare and contrast related research methodologies and findings. Ultimately, the literature review allowed me to bring different voices into conversation with each other in a way that uniquely shone a light on my own problem of practice in my own setting. Furthermore, the literature review helped me move forward with other parts of the dissertation as it exposed me to potential pathways for methodology and design (Efron & Ravid, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and as it gave me perspectives on how my own findings can “advance...refine...or revise...what is already known” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 91).

This chapter will explore first a historical examination of the deficit perspective and counter perspectives that help encourage a shift from viewing the source of the problem as situated within Black male students and their culture to instead acknowledging that the source of the problem is actually a complex interaction of societal

forces and institutions. A theoretical framework of both CRT and identity formation theory will be established in further detail. Other topics will include the process of gifted identification in my setting and how stereotype threat may work as a barrier to that process; Black male identity formation; and an exploration of Black male perceptions of themselves, their teachers, and the institution of school.

Historical Perspectives

This section will outline, from a CRT perspective, attempts at and motivations for desegregation; the achievement gap that became apparent after desegregation and persists still; the deficit perspective from which researchers have viewed Black males; pedagogical movements that have attempted to combat the forces that educationally marginalize and oppress Black males; and challenges to standardized testing as a valuable measure of potential for marginalized groups like Black males.

Desegregation de jure came about with *Brown v. Board* in 1954. Desegregation de facto has yet to occur in many places. Bell (1980) proposed that desegregation did not magically happen because everyone in U.S. politics simultaneously had a sudden moral or ethical change of heart. Rather, he argues, specific interests helped fuel the change: First, desegregation lent the United States a certain ethos on the world stage as a very timely reminder that “all men are created equal.” Second, many Americans were growing fearful of the resentment from Black World War II veterans, who had seen how much better they could be treated elsewhere and who instead were fighting in defense of a country that continued to oppress them. Third, particularly in the South, segregation was becoming a barrier to industrialization. Thusly, segregation became a legal reality even though it in and of itself was not the real goal.

For all intents and purposes, schools in the 70s were still segregated. Legal challenges to claims of segregation were dismissive, often noting that these matters were subject to local control (Bell, 1980). Such difficulties only intensified when “plaintiffs [had to] prove that the complained-of segregation was the result of discriminatory actions intentionally and invidiously conducted or authorized by school officials. It [was] not enough that segregation was the ‘natural and foreseeable’ consequence of their policies” (Bell, 1980, p. 527). By the 90s, segregation—if not by school, then by classroom— was still of concern. (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Even well after schools were desegregated if not truly integrated, there were noticeable differences in the performance of Black students and White students. The term “achievement gap” was first coined by James S. Coleman et al. in a 1963 report for NCES to describe the gap between Black and White educational performance. Over 30 years later, the problem had not markedly improved: By the mid-90s, many schools, particularly inner-city ones, were not only de facto segregated (as they were in the decades before, and as they are now); but also, they had not made any progress on closing the “achievement gap” in the 30 years since it had first been identified (Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2009; NCES, 2019b).

For many years before and after integration, academic writing on African American students used language that situated the problem within the Black students and their communities such as “culturally deprived and disadvantaged...deficient” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 9). One researcher combed through studies that focused on Black males from each decade from the 1930s to the 1990s to identify the “same old stories” — stereotypical patterns and historical trends of representation that have continued to

resurface about Black males in social science and educational writings over the decades—and identified four overarching patterns: “absent and wandering, impotent and powerless, soulful and adaptive, and endangered and in crisis” (Brown, 2011, p. 2048). Brown posited that essentially all research from the 1930s into the first decade of the 21st century arrived at conclusions that fall into these now-stereotypical categories, often by pathologizing Black males and often without a true examination of all of the social forces that have produced the stereotypes themselves. Only recently, a more CRT-aligned approach enabled some researchers to examine the larger social and societal forces at work.

In a defensive maneuver, many educators adopted a color-blind approach to education, saying that all students deserved the same high-quality education and that race did not matter. This approach prove to be essentially useless: Ignoring the fact that race *does* matter and that racism *does* exist only serves to marginalize students of color and the experiences they bring to the classroom (Dixson & Anderson, 2018). Another instance of a less effective attempt at reform came in the form of token efforts to incorporate more multicultural resources into the curriculum. Increased representation in curricular materials is only one facet of effective multicultural pedagogy (Banks, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Other attempts at reform included intervention programs, which made marginal differences and often, again, situated the problem within the students themselves and/or within the African American culture or community (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

An important turning point in race-related pedagogy was the 1994 publication of *The Dream Keepers*, where in Ladson-Billings called for a new kind of teaching:

culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). Whereas programs “designed to remediate or accelerate without attending to students’ social or cultural needs...[and programs] designed to resocialize African American students to mainstream behaviors, values, and attitudes at the same time that they teach basic skills” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 11) were not effective because they did not honor the culture that the students already brought to the classroom, CRP capitalized on students’ social and cultural backgrounds. Very recently, some educators have transitioned from the phrase “culturally relevant pedagogy” to the phrase “culturally sustaining pedagogy,” which aligns with Ladson-Billings’s (2009) assertion that “...culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to *maintain* [emphasis added] it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (p. 19). The recent change in diction toward culturally sustaining pedagogy emphasizes the need to actively strive against the erasure of students’ cultures and to provide students support in navigating the dominant culture without indoctrinating them in it (California Department of Education, 2020).

Another useful framework for working against the deficit perspective is Yosso’s (2005) concept of community cultural wealth. Using, critiquing, and transforming Bourdieu’s (1986) earlier conception of cultural capital, Yosso’s critique took issue with Bourdieu’s discussion that implies there is a hierarchy of cultures where persons of color or lower class have less valuable ways of knowing or being. As an alternative lens, community cultural wealth has six different domains: (a) Aspirational capital: maintaining hope/perseverance in the face of a harsh reality and barriers to achievement; (b) Linguistic capital: the idea that most students of color are experienced in either multiple languages, multiple dialects, or multiple linguistic styles; (c) Familial capital: a

sense of community and caring that extends far beyond the normal nuclear family; (d) Social capital: a sense of community support/network – associated with the “lifting-as-we-climb” kind of support/mentality; (e) Navigational capital: the ability to maneuver through institutions that were designed for other people—or in some cases, were expressly designed against one’s maneuvering; and (f) Resistant capital: the knowledge and skills required to identify and act against injustice. More recent writing about “the achievement gap” resembles this perspective (e.g., Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Emdin, 2017; Howard, 2008).

Another turning point in race-related pedagogy, specifically in regard to assessment, emerged when Steele and Aronson’s (1995) hallmark study in racialized test performance. Their goal was to test whether stereotype threat, the threat of feeling like you represent a stereotype about a group to which you belong, would impact African American students’ performance on an ability test. The researchers found that Black students performed significantly worse on tests when they were prompted, implicitly or explicitly, prior to a test to think about the racial group to which they belonged: “Stereotype-threatened participants spent more time doing fewer items more inaccurately” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 809) when compared to their White peers in any test group and to their Black peers in the control groups. This discovery was important for those in the field of education and prompted later studies that confirmed the hypothesis (e.g., Osborne, 2001; Osborne & Walker, 2006).

In another study, Osborne and Walker (2006) tested the hypothesis that high achieving students of color are more at risk of withdrawing from school than high achieving White students due to negative stigma, stereotype threat, and domain

identification — the degree to which students identify with the academic domain. The driving idea was that because “strong identification with academics and poor academic performance are incompatible with a positive self-image...schooling becomes aversive” (Osborne & Walker, 2006, p. 566). This longitudinal study followed the 131 students for 2 years. Overall analysis of the data set revealed that “higher identification among high school students is related to higher GPA, lower absenteeism, and fewer behavioral referrals” (p. 570). However, disaggregating the data set by race proved the initial hypothesis: “Increasing IA (identification with academics) among [White] students is associated with decreasing probability of withdrawal, and the reverse is true for students of color” (Osborne & Walker, 2006, p. 571).

Despite the past decades of research and pedagogical reform efforts, not much has changed since Coleman et al.’s 1963 NCES report: A recent NCES (2019) report found that Black males are more likely to be expelled, more likely to be classified as needing special education, more likely to drop out, and less likely to enroll in gifted classes than any other demographic subgroup. Regarding my study, the impact of the “achievement gap” on gifted education is worth noting. In 2017–2018 (the most recent year for which full reports are available), NCES (2019a) reported that there were, in total, 3,329,540 public school students enrolled in gifted programs nationwide. Of that total, 1,944,410 were White (58%); 273,280 were Black (8%). The same report listed statistics by state, and in my state, 119,497 public school students were enrolled in gifted programs. Of that total, 85,055 were White (71%); 19,855 were Black (17%). Given Ladson-Billings’s (2009) assertion that “an improvement in the achievement levels of African American

students” is possible “only when individual classrooms are desegregated (p .7), this discrepancy is disturbing.

From a CRT perspective, the perpetuation of tracking is not surprising: Through its link to college admissions and college success and, therefore, long-term earning potential, tracking allows members of the mostly White, privileged, dominant culture to maintain their privilege and dominance. De-tracking – eliminating separate classrooms for high-performing students in favor of heterogenous classrooms – is one compelling option that may help with that discrepancy and may lead to a path of true racial integration.

Research on de-tracking has been mixed, but Rui’s (2009) meta-analysis of decades of research revealed “that de-tracking practice had moderately positive effects on the academic outcomes of low-achieving students, and no significant effects on the academic outcomes of high or average-ability students” (p. 181). In another study, Atteberry et al. (2019) proved that this same effect was true even in International Baccalaureate courses. Thus, as research suggests that the practice of de-tracking shows some promise of improvement for the lowest-achieving students without any significant disadvantages for other students, de-tracking is one promising option for achieving educational equity.

However, de-tracking would be a complicated process. For one, providing lower-achieving students seats in a classroom with higher-achieving peers is not enough; schools and teachers would have to find ways to supplement curriculum with “sufficient skill-building opportunities” (Domina et al., 2019, p. 315) for lower-achieving students

so that they do not become “overwhelmed or left behind” (Rubin & Noguera, 2004, p. 99). In fact, even a de-tracked classroom could become re-tracked or re-segregated from within unless ample support is given both to previously underserved students and to the classroom teachers, who must strive for differentiation and for the implementation of more creative assessments and active learning to engage all learners (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Rubin & Noguera (2004) suggest that best practices for de-tracked classroom teachers would include “simulations, Socratic seminars, and project-based learning” (p. 99). In order to support teachers as they adopt such practices for all learners, school districts would have to reconceptualize professional development (Atteberry et al., 2019; Domina et al., 2019; Rubin & Noguera, 2004).

De-tracking would also require daunting shifts in school culture. Parents of high-achieving students in particular are likely to protest to such a drastic change; these parents may have a perspective based more on competition than on equity, and they may perceive de-tracking as a threat to their – and their children’s – comfortable status quo (Atteberry et al., 2019; Welner & Burris, 2006). Therefore, successful de-tracking “requires school leaders to take on longstanding practice and assumptions. They must share a commitment to the belief that equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive” (Atteberry et al., 2019, p. 39), and they must have the ability and the stamina to help lead others to that understanding despite resistance.

Finally, as complicated as de-tracking would be in and of itself, it also remains only one step along the path to real integration, for “it must be part of more comprehensive reform aimed at the equitable redistribution of resources and

opportunities within schools, deliberately placing the needs of previously underserved students at the center of reform initiatives” (Rubin & Noguera, 2004, p. 92).

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation is undergirded primarily by the theoretical framework of CRT. A theoretical framework is what helps a study take shape, allowing a researcher to organize concepts and ideas in a compelling and meaningful way. Because of my own belief that racism is inherently, inextricably linked to institutions — such as schools — and because my observed problem is racial in nature, CRT made logical sense as the “blueprint...[or] foundation” for this study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). Most of the discussion in this section, then, will focus on the tenets and applications of CRT, followed by a brief discussion of two ancillary theories that have informed this work: identity formation theory and, specifically, racial identity formation.

CRT

CRT delineates an inextricable link between race and property; Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), as well as other theorists (e.g., Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Solórzano, 1997), have built on and added to this idea in noteworthy ways, customizing it as a lens from which to critique education although it was originally a legal approach.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) summarized the key points of legal CRT as follows:

1. Race is endemic and is inextricably linked to inequity.
2. Much of U.S. society is based on property rights — and “Whiteness [i]s the ultimate property” (p. 58).

3. The link between race and property offers an analytical framework from which to critique society in general and school in particular.

The first proposition imbues everything from a critical race theorist's perspective. One must think of racism in an all-encompassing way and realize all its manifestations:

“Racism is not a series of isolated acts, but is endemic in American life, deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically” (Delgado in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52). An acknowledgement of racism as well as an acknowledgement of the construct of race is essential, for CRT requires “challenging claims of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 56).

CRT acknowledges not just that racism persists, but that it is deeply and historically entrenched, wrapped up in the very founding of our country – which leads to the second proposition, that property rights are paramount to US culture and are a racially charged issue:

There exists a tension between human rights and property rights....The purpose of the government was to protect the main object of society – property. The slave status of most African Americans...resulted in their being objectified as property. And, a government constructed to protect the rights of property owners lacked the incentive to secure human rights for the African Americans. (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 53)

Even carried through to current educational conditions, this proposition is relevant: School funding is based on property taxes, so the better (more higher priced) the properties in a district, the better (more fully funded) its schools are. More often than not, in communities with large concentrations of people of color, property values are lower

(Rothwell & Perry, 2021), which results in less property taxes and less school funds, in turn resulting in lower per-pupil expenditures and less access to materials, or “real property – science labs, computers, and other state-of-the-art technologies, appropriate certified and prepared teachers” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 54). Thus, property rights have been a source of and a perpetuator of inequity since the inception of the United States.

There are other ways to draw explicit connections between the idea of “property” and the school. In legal CRT discourse, Harris (1993) proposed that the property of Whiteness includes the following functions: “rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, representation and status property, and the absolute right to exclude” (p. 1731). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) provided some examples for how these functions show up in schooling: “students are rewarded only for conformity to perceived ‘White norms’ or sanctioned for cultural practices (e.g., dress, speech patterns)” (p. 59); “real” property and material resources are differently allocated, as acknowledged earlier; non-White schools or programs are written off as lesser than; and, in the case of the absolute right to exclude, “White flight...the growing insistence on vouchers, public funding of private schools, and schools of choice...resegregation via tracking” (p. 60). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) decried the ineffectiveness of civil rights laws and integration in general, explaining that “integration” has not lived up to its name, instead only resulting in subtler, more innovative methods of segregation. At my school, the concept of property rights factors into advanced courses, which have been the domain of White students.

CRT also has distinct applications in terms of action research methodology. One common methodology in educational CRT action research is that of sharing counternarratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These stories have benefits not just for the tellers, but for the listeners: “Stories by people of color can catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58). For these reasons, CRT places high value on experiential knowledge and in lifting the voices of people of color (Solórzano, 1997). While storytelling is powerful and honors CRT’s emphasis on experiential knowledge, it alone is not enough; Ladson-Billings (1995) in retrospect cautioned against stories that “[do] not advance larger concerns or help us understand how law or policy is operating” (Ladson-Billings in Dixson & Anderson, 2018, p. 124). Thus, quality CRT uses storytelling to make larger points, indicate larger patterns, and critique society — not just as storytelling in and of itself.

One recent trend related to CRT is to bring it into discussion with Bourdieu’s (1986) Theory of Practice. Bourdieu’s work focuses on the construction and reproduction of power structures and hierarchies based on capital – basically, how those in power maintain power. Three key concepts are those of social or cultural capital, a person’s social network, its size, and how they maintain it; fields, “social worlds with their own, often implicit, rules” (Tichavakunda, 2019, p. 655); and habitus, “the dispositions one learns as a result of social class, family, and culture” (Tichavakunda, 2019, p. 655). Bourdieu and CRT both emphasized that deficits lie within the system/social structure that oppresses, not within the oppressed themselves; both problematize the myths of meritocracy and equal opportunity; and both use micro-narratives or experiences to critique macro-level structures. Tichavakunda suggested that researchers using these

frameworks should pay particular attention to agency, perhaps with an eye to agency within specific fields —how different actors within one environment interact with one another to maintain or disrupt existing power structures. Further, those who examine things from Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective would do well to recognize that the oppressed have their own double-consciousness or “reflexivity” (Tichavakunda, 2019, p. 662): their own self-concept, paired with an acute awareness of how others in dominant positions view them. CRT can help researchers focus on exploring that dynamic.

Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) initial article in which they discussed the implications of CRT on the field of education closed with a discussion of how some attempts at reform simply have not produced enough change, and how CRT would need to serve as a way to critique both the problems themselves and the attempted solutions. That work remains.

Identity Formation Theory

Erikson’s (1968) seminal work on psychosocial development supposed that most adolescents by the time they are in high school are grappling with the central conflicts of industry vs. inferiority and identity vs. confusion. Interestingly, there is a striking similarity between Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness and Erikson’s work:

...identity formation employs a process...by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances

combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, “identity-consciousness.” (Erikson, 1968, pp. 22-23)

Erikson’s explicit acknowledgement that identity formation can be painful based on circumstance opens the door to view identity formation theory through a CRT lens and raises several interesting points of discussion.

First, it is worth noting that one of the earlier stages of Erikson’s work is trust vs. mistrust. Although children’s home lives and family situations before they come to the school building shape them to a great degree in terms of the trust vs. mistrust conflict, the conflict may begin again when a student enters the school building — particularly when that student is a Black male. Whether through their parents’ concerns (which children may pick up on implicitly or which may be explicitly communicated to them) or through their own observations of how they and other Black males are dealt with by schools and the adults who represent those schools, Black male students may develop a mistrust of the institution. Mistrust engenders fear and anxiety, resulting in a diminished sense of safety and security (Erikson, 1968). It is not hard to see how schools could produce those feelings for Black males.

Second, with regard to industry vs. inferiority, if teachers and other adults at school exhibit low expectations and negative opinions of a student, that student will certainly feel inferiority. The deficit perspective aimed at Black males, then, does not bode well for this stage of identity development.

Ideally, as students get older and approach the end of high school, they will negotiate their own sense of identity, working through the identity vs. confusion conflict.

While identity is not a permanently fixed attribute, as it will always shift over time, looking at this stage from a CRT vantagepoint surfaces several points for consideration.

Erikson (1968) emphasized that a student's progress on a path of healthy identity development depends on some degree of connection between "that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him" (p. 87). This point is troubling in conjunction with stereotypes and deficit perspectives. If the Black male's school career is full of reminders of how others see him — perhaps in the form of negative comments, discipline referrals, suspensions, or low performance scores — and those reminders are all negative, healthy identity development is compromised. The student either has to work harder to establish the positive identity he would rather have, or he must compromise and lean into the identity others are creating for him, or he can just remain in a perpetual state of confusion and what Erikson called identity diffusion.

In addition, even if the student has a generally positive encounter with the institution of school, he likely has to negotiate an identity while reconciling two different cultures, his own culture and dominant, mainstream culture: "Ethnic minority students have to 'sift through two sets of cultural values and identity options' to achieve a firm identity, so they may need more time to explore possibilities" (Kasinath, 2013, p. 2). Therefore, the identity vs. confusion stage may take longer for minoritized students.

Black men in general often receive conflicting messages about expectations depending on the environment in which they find themselves. While many White hegemonic spaces demand "dominant gender role expectations (e.g. to be successful,

competitive, aggressive),” Black males must also meet “culturally specific requirements (e.g. cooperation, promotion of group, and survival of group) of the Black community” (Hunter & Davis in Allen, 2015, p. 5; similar findings in Mincey et al., 2014).

Maintaining one’s own cultural identity and cultural values while also “playing the game” is quite the juggling and balancing act — and it is one Black males have been doing for generations. One case study captured the phenomenon of fathers trying to teach their sons how to “walk in and out of worlds or become cultural straddlers” (Allen, 2015, p. 20). This straddling can also be thought of as a form of Yosso’s (2005) navigational capital: Black men must acquire the ability to maneuver through institutions that were designed for people unlike them— or in some cases, were expressly designed against their maneuvering. Navigational capital is an admirable skill, but it can also be exhausting to keep up; sometimes, Black men in particular can experience “racial battle fatigue” as a response to merely surviving in a White hegemonic world (Allen, 2015, p. 17).

Further complicating the identity vs. confusion stage, many discussions of Black masculinity present options that seem like binaries, but work more like sliding scales. One seeming binary is that of *either* respect — “self-control, acquisition of skills, and mastery of rules at the expense of self-asserti[on] and expressive[ness]” — *or* reputation — “self-assertion, agency, and physicality often at the expense of safety and relationships” (Adams, 2007, p. 167). Another is that of *either* accommodation — tolerating only the necessary aspects of the dominant culture — *or* assimilation — such as “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Yet another is that of *either* “soft” men — often associated with more academically-minded men, and in violation of “the hegemonic masculine code to which [Black males] were socialized” (Dancey, 2010, p. 490) — *or*

“hard” men. For anyone, “gender is inherently unstable” (Denton, 2016, p. 64), but particularly for Black men, it presents a daunting array of options and tradeoffs; figuring out which version of masculinity to perform in which place in front of which people can be overwhelming.

Offering a specific theory of racial identity, Cross et al. (1991) outlined five nonlinear stages – likely operating more like a spiral: (a) Pre-encounter: messages of Black inferiority have been internalized, probably subconsciously; person may try to assimilate into White culture and reject Black culture; (b) Encounter: usually sparked by an event that awakens person to the realities of racism; often accompanied by feelings of anger; (c) Immersion/emersion: embracing of Black culture, rejection of White culture; interest in exploring Black culture and history; anger usually gives way to comfort and security in one’s own cultural identity; (d) Internalization: still secure in one’s “Blackness,” but in less defensive or competitive ways – willing to ally with other oppressed groups, but also with Whites who “acknowledge and are respectful of his or her self-definition” (Tatum, 1992, p. 12); (e) Internalization-commitment: little difference from Stage 4; this stage has more to do with committing oneself to “Blacks as a group” and to some “plan of action” or improvement (Tatum, 1992, p. 12).

Expanded on Stage 4, Cross et al. (2017) specified the term “bridging” for alliances made with members of the other, dominant group and explained how bridging is both helpful and difficult: “Bridging is a wonderful relief from having to be ‘on guard’ in interactions and exchanges with ‘the other,’” but “such boundary crossing can trigger animus from members of one’s own racial-ethnic group” (p. 6). Acknowledging the basic human need for belonging and attachment, Cross et al. (2017) noted that those feelings

“are bolstered by the presence of similar others” (p. 7). For Black males in my setting, finding “similar others” in advanced courses is rare, further complicating their self-concept and their identity formation.

Drawing on the ways that Black males interact with their environments to build, adjust, and adapt their identities, this study focused on the degree to which race has played a key role in their identity formations. Examining how Black males develop their definitions of their own identities from cultural observation, from teacher interactions, from their families, and from their peer groups — those who look like them and those who do not — was central to this work, and CRT provided a lens through which to examine the identity formation process.

Definitions of Giftedness and Eligibility for Advanced Courses

Current state mandates explain that all school districts in my state must test students during their second-grade year to identify them for gifted education. More frequent testing is allowed, but the baseline expectation is the second-grade test. According to the Department of Education (2019), each “district should develop procedures to ensure that...students who have not previously qualified for the gifted and talented program are not overlooked” (p. 7); however, no systematic approach to that aim is established. My district policy offers three qualifying criteria, of which students must meet at least two (see Appendix A). At both state and district levels, identification rests heavily on standardized test scores. Given how stereotype threat based on race impacts test scores (Francis & Darity, 2021; Osborne, 2001; Osborne & Walker, 2006; Steele & Aronson, 1995;), an identification process that relies primarily on test scores is problematic.

As has been established, objectivity and meritocracy are myths in the world of standardized testing (Francis & Darity, 2021; Osborne, 2001; Osborne & Walker, 2006; Steele & Aronson, 1995;), and “the intrinsic features of high-stakes testing...function as mechanisms used for racial coding that facilitate segregation and compound inequalities found in schools” (Knoester & Au, 2017, p. 2). Standardized intelligence tests, historically speaking, have been designed in accordance with, have been maintained by, and have supported eugenic points of view (Knoester & Au, 2017). Standardized testing today is not all that different; for example,

because the SAT is constructed on past performance of SAT takers as a predictor of what makes a “good” SAT question for future tests – and past performance correlates strongly with race and class, the SAT is fundamentally built around a self-reinforcing cycle of racism that limits the college access of non-Whites.
(Knoester & Au, 2017, p. 8)

In all of these ways, standardized testing as a whole perpetuates cycles of oppression.

Noticeably, my State Department of Education does allow for referrals into gifted education from administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, and even parents (or guardians) and students themselves. The Best Practices manual cautions that “careful attention should be made to ensure that the [referral] process is not a barrier for underrepresented populations” (SCDOE, 2019, p. 7). While this idea noble, statewide data — as discussed previously — reveal that even the referral program is not producing an enrollment of gifted students of color that correlates with the population demographics of our state.

Complexities of African American Male Identity Formation

This section will explore how African American males construct their gendered and racialized identities and how those identities (and their intersections) inform their academic self-concept. This discussion rests on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, which asserts that individuals learn through their interactions with other members of society; in this way, concepts such as race, masculinity, and their intersections are socially constructed. Understanding the factors that influence that process of construction will be important in my study for understanding Black males' relationship with the world of school.

Not much research exists to explain how Black adolescent males negotiate the meaning-making process in terms of masculinity. One study examined how U.S. students in middle school conceptualize masculinity and racial identity as well as their intersections (Isom, 2007). Based on participatory observations, survey data, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews, Isom (2007) found that when asked to think about "maleness" (what being a boy means), all participants answered with specific physical activities and behaviors — such as "likes to ride bikes" or "plays rough" (p. 411). When asked to think about "masculinity" (e.g., "Describe the ideal man"), most participants answered with a much more nuanced, well-rounded concept of a caring, educated man with integrity. Isom (2007) speculated that "the bifurcation embedded in their definitions of maleness and masculinity may speak to a duality in their view of maleness as well as to a sense of the authentic versus constructed self" (p. 414).

Isom's (2007) research is particularly interesting in terms of intersectionality. When asked to discuss the intersection of race and gender (e.g., "What does it mean to be

a Black boy? What does it mean to be a Black girl?”), in most cases, “the latter was tainted by the former” (p. 415). In other words, the addition of race to the gender construct tainted it in negative and stereotypical ways. Isom (2007) theorized that what happens in these students’ subconscious is a sort of “double consciousness” like Du Bois wrote about: They have their own realities, but they are also aware of how other people construct those realities and construct alternate realities when they see them.

Interestingly, Black males are likely to have a heightened sense of this intersection between race and gender. Chavous et al. (2008) posited that the parents of Black males typically raise them with an acute awareness of their race and its implications, an idea with broader resonance after what feels like a recent uptick in police violence against Black males – although that phenomenon has always been a trend. Treating identity formation from a CRT perspective, which entails knowing that racism is endemic, requires recognition that all facets of one’s identity are shaped by an understanding of one’s race, as both Cross et al. and Isom suggested.

The idea of domain identification offers us a framework with which to examine the relationship between Black males and their schooling (Osborne & Walker, 2006; Tate, 1994). Osborne and Walker (2006) defined domain identification as “the extent to which an individual defines the self through a role or performance in a particular domain” (p. 563). Areas with which individuals strongly identify often receive the most effort, time, and attention. Specifically, education professionals must look at the possible ways Black males identify their senses of self in relation to their performance in the school building.

Disconnection Between Self and School

Lack of success in the academic domain typically yields three possible reactions: (a) choosing other domains with which to identify (e.g., delinquent behavior); (b) seeking extra help to strengthen performance in and attachment to the academic domain; or (c) seeking “escape through absenteeism or withdrawal” (Osborne & Walker, 2006, p. 566) — in other words, either physical or psychological withdrawal. Scholars have explored all three responses to academic domain *disidentification* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Osborne, 1997; Osborne & Walker, 2006; Steele & Aronson, 1995;). Interestingly, acting out can be thought of as another response to or coping strategy for academic domain disidentification. Travers (2019) explained that Black males are more likely to be perceived as engaging in “disruptive classroom behaviors (e.g., laughing, making constant sounds) and fighting” (p. 36). Acting out may not seem like a survival strategy or coping strategy, but it can be viewed as such: It allows Black males to make their presence and existence known in spaces that may be trying to stifle their presence and existence, acting as a form of reclamation.

Relatedly, “the cool pose” (Majors & Billson, 1992; Tatum, 2005) or its opposite extreme, “acting White” (Fordham 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), also appear in the literature. Tatum (2005) explained that the “cool pose” assumed by Black males is a style of detachment used defensively to “to cope with oppression, invisibility, and marginality...cope with conflict and anxiety...[and] manage [one’s] feelings of rage in the face of prejudice and discrimination” (p. 29).

One study proposed six facets of the cool pose: physical strength, sports involvement, concealment of feelings, emotional strength, domination, and the use of

retaliatory violence (Unnever & Chouhy, 2021). That same study suggested that young Black males are no more likely than young White males to use retaliatory violence—an interesting counterpoint to stereotypical perceptions of Black males. That study did find that “Black males were more likely than White male youths to feel greater pressure to be physically and emotionally strong, play sports, and dominate or control others” (Unnever & Chouhy, 2021, p. 490). These findings make sense as expressions of compensatory masculinity—as attempts to gain some measure of power in a society where Black males are typically subordinate.

In sum, the prevailing notion in research from the 1990s and early 2000s was that of disassociation—more commonly, disassociation from school (e.g., Osborne & Walker, 2006); but sometimes, disassociation with one’s own culture in order to assimilate into the dominant culture in the academic milieu (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Certainly, this type of disconnect has troubling implications for students’ sense of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Cokley, 2000; Cokley et al., 2003).

Some studies examined how Black students survive in and navigate the hostile or foreign-feeling environment they might encounter at school. Analyzing the relationships between racial centrality/racial identity, racial discrimination in academic settings, and academic performance Chavous et al., 2008 found that higher racial centrality—“the extent to which youths view their racial group as a defining part of their self-concepts” (p. 639)—played a somewhat protective role for the self-concept and academic performance of boys who had experienced discrimination. Another study I will discuss later in this chapter found that the most common coping strategies of Black males at school were integrative fluidity and behavioral vacillation (Hotchkins, 2016). Integrative

fluidity is a term for coalition-building between students of color. Behavioral vacillation occurs when the student tamps down or alters some aspect of their performed identity to integrate into a given situation; in other words, the student adapts their actions and behaviors to be in line with those of the dominant culture. That one of the two main coping strategies used by academically successful Black males relies on negating aspects of their own identity or culture seems particularly telling.

In more recent work, researchers and theorists have cautioned against treating Black males as a monolithic group and complicating the two extremes—the “cool pose” or “acting White.” More recent research has focused on smaller sample sizes, has utilized qualitative inquiry, and has paid more attention to the nuanced ways gender and race can interact in different students’ academic performance.

Black Males’ Perceptions of Teachers

Black males’ perception of themselves and of academia as a whole are essential to understanding this problem, but so is an examination of the potential disconnect between them and their mostly White, mostly female (NCES, 2020) teachers. Ladson-Billings, who pioneered the concept of CRP, has explored this disconnect extensively. This section will focus on the definition and applications of CRP, as well as some of the ways Black males have perceived their teachers’ practices and treatment as distinctly *not* culturally relevant.

Ladson-Billings (2009) blamed the lack of success for students of color not on any deficit in the students themselves or in their communities or cultures, but rather on “societal conflict and a struggle for power” (p. 18). CRP promotes the following goals: “(1) Students must experience academic success (2) Students must develop and/or

maintain cultural competence (3) Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Ladson-Billings’s most famous work, *The Dreamkeepers*, focused on teachers who were successfully engaged in this type of pedagogy, showcasing that there is not necessarily one recipe or checklist to follow, but rather many approaches that align with the concepts of CRP. However, the introduction to that work laments that CRP is too rarely practiced.

Many other researchers and writers have decried this lack of CRP (e.g., Emdin, 2017; Howard, 2001). Emdin (2017) has even recast the problem as “neocolonialism,” where teachers, as representatives of a dominant class/culture, try to “colonize” their “neoindigenous” students of color (p. 4). This idea aligns closely with the coping strategies discussed in the previous section: Students are expected to suppress their own identities and cultural ways of knowing and being in order to perform the behaviors and display the attributes of the dominant (White) culture.

The “hidden curriculum of Whiteness” (Allen, 1999, p. 1), reinforced by researchers such as Ladson-Billings and Emdin, and teachers’ dysconscious racism (Brown, 2011; King, 2001) together can produce a hostile environment that detracts from the sense of belonging in a classroom for any student of color. One example of how these problems play out are microaggressions. Types of microaggressions can include “microassault [e.g., name-calling], microinsult [e.g., demeaning racial heritage], microinvalidation [e.g., being complimented for speaking good English], and environmental macromicroaggressions [e.g., all university buildings named after White males]” (Howard, 2008, p. 4). If or when students can sense teachers’ deficit perspectives

of them, that has the potential to damage their self-concept and their relationship with school. Teachers' attitudes shape their expectations for student success, the way they respond to both student shortcomings and successes, their disciplinary practices, and their course recommendations.

Indeed, a recent NEA (2017) study listed significant factors that can negatively impact the performance of "culturally and linguistically diverse" students including "lack of culturally responsive assessments" and "stereotypic or lower expectations of teachers" (pp. 14-15). When instruction, including assessments, and our interactions with students display a lack of concern or respect for their cultures and their potential, teachers are shortchanging their students. To return to the idea of domain identification: Teachers, as well as other adults in the building, need to be deliberate in creating classroom and school environments and practices that do not expose Black students to microaggressions or impose the hidden curriculum of Whiteness on them. A school culture that pays respect to the idea that multiple ways of knowing and being can lead to academic success is critical.

Related Research

This section will explore four recent studies with similar aims as my study, examining their methodologies, their findings, and their implications for this current study.

Francis and Darity (2021) set out to investigate whether racialized tracking in upper grades produces a similar effect in lower grades, thereby creating a perpetual cycle of separate-and-unequal. The researchers used data from three cohorts of students (240,000 total, across more than 500 schools and 100 school districts) across their four

years of high school gathered from North Carolina's state database of student information. They found that when Black students entering ninth grade see more Black students taking AP courses, they are more likely to enroll in those courses themselves:

We find that a 1 percentage point increase in the share of black eleventh and twelfth graders in advanced math courses increases the likelihood that an academically eligible black ninth grade student will take an advanced math course before they graduate by 22 percentage points in racially diverse schools and 11 percentage points in predominantly black schools. (Francis & Darity, 2021, p. 189)

Conversely, when Black students entering ninth grade see fewer Black students taking AP courses, they are less likely to enroll in those courses.

Simply put, the authors argued that “segregation begets segregation” (Francis & Darity, 2021, p. 188). The effect was even more dramatic when the researchers looked at the data specifically for Black males. One feasible suggested solution is that schools should work very hard in the short-term to recruit more Black students to advanced courses —because this solution would self-perpetuate, given the authors’ findings that “the boost of enrollment for one cohort of students would encourage the next cohort of students to enroll and the next cohort after that...” (Francis & Darity, 2021, p. 199).

This article used only quantitative data, so any discussion of reasons for students’ choices is purely speculative, which the authors acknowledge explicitly. The authors discussed both structural and cultural arguments as potential causes, but without richer

qualitative data (i.e., hearing directly from the students themselves), attributing causes is hard. A richer qualitative data set was the goal of my study.

Flennaugh (2016) set out to examine the ways in which academically high-performing Black males perceived intersection/overlap (or not) between their school lives and their worlds outside of school. The larger point was to look beyond systemic, structural inequalities and beyond deficit perspectives and instead to embrace the idea that each Black male brings a unique voice to the conversation. This qualitative study identified a sample population of “high performing” (GPA exceeding 3.0) African American males at one specific high school that was majority Black. The students were asked to produce “identity maps” that showed all the significant aspects of their self-concept —Venn-diagram-like structures that included overlap where appropriate, and that used differently sized circles (small, medium, or large) to represent the significance of each aspect the student chose to include.

From the collected identity maps, the researcher chose to focus on two specific students whose identity maps served as a jumping off point for individual, semi-structured interviews. Both young men drew their “school” circle as a small size (i.e., having less significance in their self-concept), and both young men had school overlapping only marginally with very few other areas of their lives. In follow-up interviews, two striking pieces of data emerged. First, one student articulated a very specific difference between “school” and “education.” Second, neither student identified any significant, self-forming relationships at school other than peer relationships —in other words, neither one talked about a faculty or staff member who was integral to their self-concept at any point during their schooling. Flennaugh (2016) found these results disturbing:

because a child who has found little or no overlap between who they see themselves as a student and those components of identity that are situated in the extracurricular activities available at school; the peers they associate with at school; and the presumed function of school to prepare them for higher education indicates conceptual barriers embedded in the process of schooling that even academically successful Black male students perceive. (p. 3)

My study, too, aimed to provide a vehicle for individual counternarratives, opting to treat each student individually instead of looking monolithically at the general population of high performing Black males. My study also cast a broader net for Black males with the *potential* of high performance —those who are eligible for advanced classes but may be choosing not to take them, or who at one point took those classes but now do not —and to examine why their full potential may seem out of reach.

Anderson (2016) sought to determine which organizational practices on a school level were the best predictors of high-achieving Black males' persistence in advanced mathematics courses. the study acknowledged that students' "latent traits, such as self-efficacy and identity" (Anderson, 2016, p. 8) matter, yet the researcher wished to establish that "structural supports matter and the onus of Black male mathematics success is not solely due to individual determination" (Anderson, 2016, p. 8).

Using data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, Anderson identified ninth graders who demonstrated advanced ability by scoring in the top 20% nationally on standardized tests. Following those students to the 11th grade revealed that they were almost three times as likely to remain in the top 20% nationally if they took

advanced math courses and matriculated to pre-calculus. Anderson used survey data from administrators at relevant schools to identify what types of extracurricular activities or other school-based interventions/enrichments were in place, in search of correlation between the two data sets. The most impactful activities included “partnerships with community colleges and universities, science and mathematics guest speakers, and science/math-related field trips” (Anderson, 2016, p. 1). The author admitted that the nature of this problem is highly nuanced and probably warrants more qualitative study.

Hotchkins (2016) examined the “navigational strategies” (i.e., coping strategies) of Black males amid the landscape of microaggressions from White teachers and administrators at a culturally diverse high school. The phenomenological qualitative study relied on a sample of six Black males, gleaned narrative data from two in-depth interviews and two shorter follow-up interviews with each participant. Hotchkins (2016) also convened one focus group with all six students and observed for five 75-minute periods both in classrooms and at lunch. Constant comparative methods yielded emergent themes.

Hotchkins (2016) looked at both structural practices and individual practices; the most problematic were individual practices from teachers, and the most common microaggression type was monolithic targeting —participants’ perceiving that their teachers were viewing them in “collective deficit terms” (p. 16). The two coping strategies that emerged were integrative fluidity and behavioral vacillation. Integrative fluidity, or integrative mobility, occurs when students “form meaningful alliances with racialized student populations not within African American social circles” (Hotchkins, 2016, p. 16), much like the concept of “fictive kin.” Behavioral vacillation refers to the

“student’s ability to adjust their behavior based on proximity to the high school environment in order to avoid reinforcing teacher perceptions of stereotypical AA male behavior” (Hotchkins, 2016, p. 16) – adapting speech patterns, dress, behavior, etc.

The study also found that some students simply chose to disengage in the hopes of going unnoticed —consistent with earlier theories about disidentification. This study took place in a state where African Americans constitute only 1% of the population, so transferability is unlikely because of the unique context. Additionally, the author cautions against “essentializing” the experiences of Black males just because their stories do include similarities/patterns. My school has a far more diverse population, so investigation is warranted; furthermore, I aimed to do exactly what Hotchkins suggested: investigate individual counternarratives and avoid “essentializing” them.

Rrelated studies have largely focused on math classes and relied on quantitative data. Many researchers (e.g., Anderson, 2016; Francis and Darity, 2021) have acknowledged the necessity of a more nuanced qualitative study design to understand more deeply the forces at work regarding the underrepresentation of Black males in advanced courses. This gap is where I expected to provide unique insight stemming from the students themselves, in alignment with my CRT framework. Capturing the voices not just of students enrolled in gifted courses, but also of students who have the potential to be enrolled but who have chosen not to provided a rich qualitative data set.

Summary

The literature in this chapter reveals daunting gaps between students’ perceptions of themselves & their cultures and the culture of academia. Given the continued need for

more research to explain this gap, current research suggests context-specific, non-essentialized counternarratives, which I planned to employ, could be most useful. Such an approach could help researchers such as myself avoid reproducing those same-old-story narratives; start turning an eye towards more nuanced, non-monolithic explorations of gifted Black males; and enlist students in coming up with some solutions to support them and the enormous potential they bring to their school communities.

The following chapter will outline my plan for gathering data from students themselves in order to analyze the complex forces that may be at work in this problem in my setting. My research design as well as my justification for design decisions will be documented, and specific methodologies of data collection and data analysis will be described.

Chapter 3:

Research Design and Methods

As described in previous chapters, data on local, district, state, and national levels indicate a trend towards the underrepresentation of students of color in advanced courses. This disparity is acutely true for Black males. My problem of practice is the underrepresentation of Black males in advanced courses at my school. I aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. What factors deter gifted Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced courses?
2. How can teachers mitigate some of those factors through curriculum and pedagogy to better serve gifted Black male students?

Given the causal chain from advanced courses to college admissions and college readiness to earning potential, the underrepresentation of Black males in advanced courses is indicative of and contributes to a larger system of economic and social inequity. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine Black male students' experiences from a critical race perspective, to identify overarching patterns in their stories, and to find some ways for my school to combat those patterns that could lead our academically gifted Black males to disidentify with their own giftedness.

This chapter will describe the elements of this phenomenological case study and its participants. It will outline the data collection methods —interviews and focus groups —I used to conduct the study, the intent of the interviews and focus group sessions, and the process for recording and coding data.

Research Design

In alignment with my theoretical framework of CRT, I wanted to design a study that foregrounded the voices of my participants. To that end, I chose to conduct phenomenological action research via interviews and focus group sessions. These methods of data collection provided me with a rich data set of student voices.

I chose action research over more traditional methods because I wanted the students to know that they, too, were stakeholders in this study —that this study would be “done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 3). I am deeply entrenched in my school community and have been for 14 years, and I am therefore deeply committed to working alongside students and colleagues to change the culture of our community.

This action research study is a qualitative phenomenological case study. My beliefs align with Efron and Ravid’s (2020) assertion about the beliefs inherent in qualitative action research: that schools capture an array of multiple, subjective realities. To investigate a subset of those subjective realities, qualitative research was the most appropriate path. In this phenomenological study, “The experiences of different people [were] bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27) of being a gifted Black male in an institution that seems

to discourage that very identification, as well as of being a gifted Black male who has chosen to opt out of gifted programming.

Because this was a phenomenological case study, and because it is informed by CRT, student voice was paramount. My chosen data collection methods, one-on-one interviews and focus groups, gave students the freedom to express their opinions (in the presence of their peers and without), helping me to understand their perceptions and experiences and to seek their opinions on how my problem of practice can be addressed. Because their lived experiences are at the heart of the problem, I wanted to feature student voices and counternarratives in a critical examination of school culture and students' academic experiences. Interviews and focus group conversations allowed me a glimpse into their perspective, allowing me to glean information about "things [I] cannot directly observe [such as]... feelings, thoughts, and intentions...how people have organized the world, and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world" (Patton in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108).

Data Collection Methods

I gathered data from students during one-to-one, semi-structured interviews —two per participant, 20 total —and through two focus group sessions, arranged according to which student had which lunch (first or second) on our A/B schedule. I conducted two rounds of interviews, one occurring before the focus group sessions and one occurring after. The original intent was to capture participants' individual perceptions first; then to capture their follow-up thoughts after the focus group sessions, in which they would have interacted with and processed the perspectives of others. Table 3.1 illustrate the timelines of the study.

Table 3.1 *Timeline of Data Collection*

Weeks 1-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first round of one-on-one interviews
Weeks 5-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus Group 1: second lunch, B-day • Focus Group 2: first lunch, A-day
Weeks 7-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • second round of one-on-one interviews

One-on-one interviews were semi-structured, which allowed me to move in different directions as I felt pulled to do so. I relied on experience/behavior questions, feeling questions, and opinions/values questions (Efron & Ravid, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Sample interview questions appear in Appendix C; some were informed by previous studies with a similar focus, and some reflect my unique knowledge of my setting. Questions include “Describe a typical honors student at this school,” “Would you describe your experiences in advanced classes as generally negative or generally positive? Explain why.,” and “Do you feel that your advanced-level teachers expect more, less, or the same from you, compared to other students in your class?”

I asked probing questions as necessary, which offered participants the chance to “co-construct the narrative and raise and pursue issues that are related to the study but were not included when the interview questions were planned” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 103). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested researchers blend together interview question types to a certain extent (e.g., more structured questions for gathering demographics) but recommended a more loosely structured interview will be more productive: “Less structured interview formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways...[and allow] the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (pp. 110-

111). I tried to heed this advice, as this methodology is thus aligned with the philosophies of action research and phenomenology.

The focus groups lasted about 15 minutes each. The first focus group had three participants, all of whom are currently enrolled in advanced courses. The second focus group had two participants, one who was enrolled in advanced courses and one who was not. All other attempts to arrange focus groups for the remaining participants failed. I posted signs that read “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree” in the four corners of my room. I read some statements such as “I think Black masculinity is valued at this school” and asked the students to move to the corner that matched their position. I then asked each to explain why they were standing where they were. As with interviews, I also asked probing follow-up questions when I heard something I wanted more information about; as a qualitative researcher, I am the “primary instrument of data collection” and therefore I strived to be a “highly sensitive instrument” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 122). I do not think that the focus groups helped participants “introduce varied points of views, and stimulate and extend one another’s thinking” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 110) to the extent that I had hoped because the groups were small and the conversation did not flow organically; however, students occasionally responded to or reacted to others’ responses in ways that were useful.

I developed protocols for both the interviews and the focus groups, which I shared with the students. I recorded audio during all sessions. Interview transcriptions generated by an online transcription service substantial editing, particularly for some of my more soft-spoken participants and for one who speaks African American Vernacular English, which the transcription software struggled to process. In correcting my transcriptions, I

became intimately acquainted with my data and kept analytic memos throughout the process. Those memos gave me a space to “capture [my] reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and things to pursue that are derived from...data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 196). The first round of interviews helped inform the second, as I was able to generate and test theories and draft follow-up questions, which I recorded in my analytic memos. The memos and close attention to the transcriptions helped me move into some data analysis while I was still in the collection stage.

I kept brief notes as the interviews were in process, as well. Notes included major topics/patterns I noticed, follow-up questions that occurred to me, and important quotes/points. I was also able to make some notes about tone and body language, as Efron and Ravid (2020) suggested, which were helpful as I strived to provide thick description of my participants and their experiences.

This case study has a narrative bent in that I have used interviews and focus groups to collect stories and to analyze and present students’ counternarratives. Stories have the power to “provide members of outgroups a vehicle for psychic self-preservation [, and] the exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world in one way” (Delgado in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). Accordingly, narratives are an important tool for a phenomenological researcher seeking to understand a phenomenon through participants’ eyes. Furthermore, CRT places a high value on experiential knowledge and on lifting the voices of people of color (Solórzano, 1997), so I hope the stories I have collected in my interviews and focus groups do just that.

Sampling Plan and Participants

My participants were Black male students at my school. I drew from two different subgroups of participants: (a) Black males currently enrolled in advanced courses and (b) Black males who exhibit gifted ability but who are not currently enrolled in advanced courses. Foregrounding the voices of these students was a fitting choice for a CRT-aligned study as it “taps the lived experiences and deep knowledge of those most harmed by the status quo and, via a process of ‘researching with,’ revisions possibilities while cultivating tools to work for change” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 158).

Because I was looking for those very specific subgroups within a much larger student population, I relied on purposive sampling, in which a qualitative researcher picks and chooses participants based on their own criteria and judgement (Efron & Ravid, 2020). I sought help from our guidance department and our AP coordinator with a focus on three possible indicators of giftedness. The first was the AP Potential Report. By pulling this report, which is based on PSAT scores, I was able to identify two Black males whose test scores indicated that they had the potential to succeed in advanced coursework. One was already enrolled in advanced courses; one was not.

My second and third data sources were CogAT and Raven’s Progressive Matrices scores, both of which were readily accessible and both of which are used by the State Department to determine initial eligibility for the giftedness label. These two tests are typically administered in elementary school, which offered me historical levels of performance. I felt strongly that this historical data was important, as current scores that may be lower than required for gifted identification might reflect disengagement and not actual ability or potential —particularly if the student previously qualified for advanced

courses based on test scores. Based on my district's guidelines (see Appendix A), I looked specifically for students who scored at or above the 94th percentile on the CogAT and who scored at or above the 96th percentile on the Raven's test. Interestingly, even with the help of our head of guidance, I was unable to electronically disaggregate data from a single test administration by race and gender, so I had to run a report of gifted-eligible test scores and then check demographics on each student individually.

Finally, I also consulted the list we receive from the State Department of Education each of year of students who are currently eligible for gifted services. Some of the students on this list likely qualified based on both their GPAs and their SC-READY scores, two metrics which I had not researched independently.

Through these processes, I built a list of 33 students who were potential contacts; 15 of those students were currently enrolled in advanced courses, and 18 were not. I also sought teacher input to recruit Black males who were currently enrolled in advanced courses but who, for whatever reason, did not meet the state's official criteria for giftedness. I added three more potential participants to my list in this way.

Armed with a list of 36 possible participants, I made some initial contact with students whom I already knew, and then I asked teachers for input on students who may be more inclined to a critical examination and open discussion about school and classroom cultures. My goal was to recruit eight students, with the expectation that a few would decline to participate and/or would leave the study in some other way (e.g. moving/transferring schools). I hoped to work with six total, preferably including students from each grade if possible, and students who were enrolled in gifted courses as well as those who were at some point eligible but were not enrolled.

Out of fear of student discomfort, reluctance, or attrition, I overshot my goal. I approached 14 students individually to make them aware of my study and my desire for their involvement. I had a brief conversation with each student, and I gave each a copy of my informed consent letter. One immediately said no. Nine said yes and quickly returned signed letters of consent. Then, one participant recruited another student. Ten participants was more than I initially wanted, but all participants expressed an eagerness to participate, so I did not feel comfortable eliminating any of them. Because I had already exceeded my desired sample size, I did not follow up with the other four students from whom I did not receive answers. Table 3.2 and the following paragraphs describe the 10 participants.

Bob was a sophomore whom I knew previously because he was enrolled in my Honors English II class the year prior. He has been in the district for his entire educational career and has been enrolled in advanced courses since third grade. He remains state-identified as a gifted student, was identified on the AP Potential report, and was enrolled in honors English, Math, and Science classes, as well as AP Social Studies at the time of the study. His goal is to attend a four-year college, perhaps Howard, and he is considering a major in Engineering or Computer Science.

Chris is one of the participants whom I did not know previously. He was a senior who transferred into the district in third grade from his previous elementary school in Nigeria. He did not take advanced courses until ninth grade, but he did skip the second grade based on his initial test scores when he moved here. He scored in the 99th percentile on the Raven's test. He had been enrolled in honors Math and Science courses for most of his high school career. At the time of our first interview, he had been accepted to four

in-state universities; at the time of our second interview, he had made his choice and was excited to graduate so he could begin his college career with a major in Biology and with the intention of going into the field of radiology.

Collin was another participant whom I did not know previously. Armed with my initial list of potential participants, I had asked his current English teacher about some students, and she identified Collin as a bright student who would likely engage in meaningful conversation with me. Collin was a sophomore who has been in this district for the entirety of his educational career. He attended a Montessori elementary school. He first became aware of his eligibility for giftedness in sixth grade, so he began advanced coursework then. He was enrolled in honors English, Math, and Science courses at the time of the study. He hopes to attend a four-year college where he can play college football and major in architecture.

Daniel, whom I also did not know previously, was a junior enrolled in the IB program. In elementary school, Daniel, like Chris, lived in Nigeria. He moved here and began attending middle school in this district. He had been enrolled in advanced courses since sixth grade. During his freshman and sophomore years, Daniel attended a magnet program for Career Leadership at a different high school within the district. Ultimately, Daniel and his parents decided that the IB program would be the best fit for him for his junior and senior years, so he transferred to our school. He knows he wants to attend a four-year college after high school but is still looking at many options.

David is another participant whom I did not know previously. He was a senior who has spent his entire educational career within this district. He scored in the 96th percentile on the Raven's test. He did take advanced courses from third through eighth

grade, with some brief interruptions. David had not taken any advanced courses during his high school career. At the time of our interviews, David was waiting on acceptance at an in-state college, hoping to major in business or finance and ultimately open his own financial planning business.

Guy was the one participant whom I found through snowball sampling. Bob recommended him to me. Guy was a sophomore who had been in the district for the entirety of his educational career. He attended a Montessori elementary school. He scored in the 97th percentile on the Raven's test and was identified as an AP Potential student based on his most recent PSAT scores. He chose to begin taking honors classes in ninth grade. He was enrolled in honors English, Math, and Science, as well as AP Social Studies at the time of this study. He has two older brothers who also graduated from our school, one from the IB program. Guy ultimately hopes to attend Columbia University, where he wants to major in journalism.

Jelly was a freshman in one of my CP English classes. He had been in this district for the entirety of his educational career. He had never enrolled in any advanced courses, and he said that neither he nor his mom were ever made aware that he was eligible for them. He scored in the 97th percentile on the Raven's test. At the time of our second interview, he was thinking about enrolling in an honors Social Studies class for his sophomore year. He ultimately hopes to attend a four-year college.

John was also a freshman, but I did not know him previously. He scored in the 99th percentile on the Raven's test; when I approached his English teacher with the names of a few students of hers as potential participants, she immediately recommended him because of his insight, his well-roundedness, and his candor. He had been enrolled in

advanced courses since middle school and was enrolled in honors English and Science at the time of the study. He intended to add honors Math to his courses for his sophomore year. He transferred to this district when he was in elementary school. He began his high school career at a different high school within the district but transferred to our school after a few months. He loves reading and candle-making, and he has an interest in podcasting. He ultimately hopes to attend a four-year college to major in geology and/or business.

Josh was a junior who had just transferred to our district and our school. He previously attended a public high school in a different region of this state. He had been enrolled in advanced courses since middle school and was enrolled in AP English and honors Math at the time of the study. He ultimately hopes to attend a four-year college with a major in software programming.

Phil was a freshman in one of my English classes. He had been in the district since first grade. He was and remains state-identified as gifted, but he only enrolled in one advanced course in sixth grade and had not enrolled in any advanced coursework since then. He hopes to attend a four-year college with a major in Marine Biology.

Table 3.2 *Participant Data*

Pseudonym	Grade Level	In district for elementary and middle?	Years at this high school	Advanced course enrollment	Identification criteria for this study	Post-secondary goals/plans
Bob	10	Yes	2	Since third grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still state-identified as gifted • Identified as an AP Potential student • Enrolled in honors English, Math, & Science and AP Social Studies 	4-year college, maybe with a major in Engineering or Computer Science
Chris	12	E: Since third grade M: Yes	4	Since ninth grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raven's score: 99th percentile • Currently enrolled in honors Math and Science 	Accepted to 4-year college; majoring in Biology, going into Radiology
Collin	10	Yes	2	Since sixth grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently enrolled in honors English, Math, and Science 	4-year college; hopes to play college football and major in architecture
Daniel	11	E: No M: Yes	1	Since sixth grade	Currently enrolled in IB	4-year college
David	12	Yes	4	From third through eighth grade	Raven's score: 96 th percentile	Waiting on acceptance from 4-year college, maybe with a major in business or finance
Guy	10	Yes	2	Since ninth grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified as an AP Potential student • Raven's score: 97th percentile • Enrolled in honors English, Math, & Science and AP Social Studies 	4-year college with a major in journalism
Jelly	9	Yes	1	Never	Raven's score: 97 th percentile	4-year college
John	9	E: Partial M: Yes	1	Since middle school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raven's score: 99th percentile • Currently enrolled in honors English and Biology 	4-year college with a major in geology and/or business
Josh	11	No	1	Since middle school	Currently enrolled in AP English and honors Math	4-year college with a major in software programming
Phil	9	E: Yes M: Yes	1	Sixth grade only	Still state-identified as gifted	4-year college with a major in Marine Biology

I established two-way contact with parents for each of my participants – one via phone, and the other nine via email. I also hosted a virtual meeting one evening with the purpose of explaining my study and answering their questions. Only one parent attended. I talked for a few minutes about my research, and she said she did not have any questions; she said she had attended because she wanted to meet me “face to face.” In all of my initial communications with students and parents, I emphasized that participation was voluntary and that participants would remain anonymous. I assured them I would use aliases instead of real names, and that I would omit as much identifying information as possible to help maintain anonymity. Additionally, I explained that all transcripts, notes, and recordings would be maintained with password protection.

Data Analysis Methods

The purposes of this study were (a) to draw upon the details of students’ voices and stories in order to find patterns and commonalities in their experiences with gifted coursework, and (b) to move the conversation toward solutions, recommending ways that schools can mitigate forces of “oppression, invisibility, [and] marginality” (Tatum, 2005, p. 29) to better serve academically gifted Black males. I therefore looked for patterns in my data of both problems and solutions; throughout the coding process, I worked on “identifying segments in [my] data set that [we]re responsive to [my] research questions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 203).

My analytic memos, my notes on interviews and focus groups, and my transcripts of the sessions provided me with a wealth of data. I followed the qualitative data analysis steps of “breaking down the data into parts, organizing it into codes, and identifying recurring constructs and categories” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 167). I did not develop

predetermined codes/categories; rather, to bracket my own understandings and foreground student voice, I relied on emergent coding as I combed through the data. As I corrected transcriptions of interviews, I kept reflective memos that included lists of themes I wanted to test out —ones that seemed significant or that I had noticed emerging across multiple transcripts. Once I had a list of codes that had emerged from the data set, I doubled back through the transcripts and used a color-coded highlighting system to emphasize thematic patterns. This approach was instrumental in reporting my findings, as I was quickly able to identify specific examples of broader themes in the data set.

I employed constant comparative analysis: For each data set I acquired, I compared it with previous data sets to find patterns and establish codes. During second round interviews, I “tr[ie]d out ideas and themes on participants” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 198) to ensure that I was interpreting participants’ experiences fairly and accurately. In keeping with the cyclical nature of action research, I coded data between first and second round interviews, returning to my sources/participants for follow-up, clarification, and expansion.

On a related note, I used member checking as one way to ensure validity, transparency, and ethical consideration. Maintaining extensive documentation, including notes and audio recordings, helped. I also provided thick description of my setting and my participants, “allow[ing] the audience to authentically perceive the participants’ views and ‘enter’ into their world by seeing, hearing, and sensing their experiences...to better understand [my] interpretation of the data, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the study” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 76-77). I hoped my focus on unity of approach and on multiple voices/perspectives served as proof of process validity and democratic validity

(Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Because my “data sources” are students, I did worry that a potential limitation might emerge in the form of a lack of awareness of some of the larger cultural forces at work in our school/society, and/or a lack of vocabulary to articulate their thoughts around those forces. I found that this concern was not particularly well-founded, although my two freshman participants in particular as well as a few older participants who had been enrolled in primarily CP classes did not fully recognize how segregated their classes were.

A significant limitation of the study is that the focus groups simply did not produce a rich data set because of limited student attendance. Our school runs on an A/B schedule and had recently switched to two different lunches when I began gathering data, so coordinating schedules was difficult. I did not wish to pull students from class or ask them to give me extra time after school, especially because several of them had athletic practices and/or rode the bus home. Because only half of my participants attended the two focus groups —two in the first session and three in the second — I do not think they helped extend students’ thinking.

One other limitation was the comfort level I was able to establish with students who did not previously know me. I did find that students with whom I had previously existing relationships were more open and conversational, while most of the students who did not know me either remained a little more closed off or took a little longer to warm up, so to speak.

Summary

This phenomenological action research study addresses the problem of low enrollment of Black males in advanced courses. The research questions were designed to elicit the perspectives of students to explore how they experience this phenomenon within the local context. The data collection instruments consisted of two cycles of interviews and three focus group sessions. Transcripts of interviews and focus group sessions were subjected to emergent coding, with patterns emerging directly from student voices.

Chapter 4:

Presentation and Analysis of Data

My problem of practice is the underrepresentation of Black males in our advanced courses at the school where I teach, an urban school that serves roughly 1400 students, 46% White, 41% Black, and 13% other races. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors deter gifted Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced courses?
2. How can teachers mitigate some of those factors through curriculum and pedagogy to better serve gifted Black male students?

This study relied on data gathered from the 10 participants outlined in Chapter 3. Each of the 10 Black male participants met at least one of the established criteria for the study: (a) current enrollment in honors, AP, or IB courses; (b) identification through the College Board's AP Potential Report; (c) score level at or above the 94th percentile on the CogAT test; (d) score level at or above the 96th percentile on the Raven's test; (e) inclusion on the State Department's list of currently-gifted-eligible students. I employed purposive sampling after generating a list of all eligible students. I contacted a few students whom I already knew and asked for input from some of my colleagues to recruit others. One instance of snowball sampling, in which one participant recruited another participant, occurred.

Participants were comprised of three freshmen, three sophomores, two juniors, and two seniors. As outlined in the previous chapter, seven of the participants were enrolled in at least one advanced course. Two had been enrolled previously in advanced courses but no longer were. One had never been enrolled in any advanced coursework. I offered participants the chance to come up with their own pseudonyms, and all but three of them self-selected. I selected the remaining pseudonyms.

I gathered data from these students during two rounds of one-on-one semi-structured interviews and during two focus group sessions. Coding the transcripts using constant comparative analysis allowed me to identify emergent themes and triangulate data that reflected key commonalities as well as differences in participants' experiences. In keeping with the intent of my CRT approach, I bracketed my own perceptions of any issues at hand and relied on student voices to bring up themes as students' articulated experiences connected and overlapped.

This chapter will discuss the themes that emerged from my constant comparative analysis of student voices. Again, in keeping with the intent of a CRT approach, I use student voice heavily throughout this chapter as these participants' counternarratives illuminate in insightful and specific ways some possible answers to my research questions. After presenting data by theme, I explore general findings and I posit answers to my research questions based on students' experiences.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

Based on my constant comparative analysis as I combed through transcriptions and coded data, I noticed both striking similarities between and striking differences

among participants' experiences. The first two themes are related to the initial choice to take advanced courses: one, how we market and incentivize advanced coursework; and two, how we notify and/or advise students into (or out of) advanced coursework. Next for discussion are two aspects of participants' self-perceptions: the degree to which participants have felt like they are the "odd one out," and then their academic self-perceptions. Next are two themes that express how participants see themselves fitting into the larger school community: discussions about their relationships with both peers and adults on campus, and discussions about the microaggressions or implicit racism they have witnessed and felt. Finally, with an eye toward classroom pedagogy, discussion will center on the final theme, which relies on the diversity of participants' experiences and preferences to prove that CRP is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

Marketing and Incentivizing Advanced Coursework

"It's like a machine. You just keep working and working and working." — Daniel

One theme that emerged as I spoke to Daniel, an IB student, in our first interview was what we agreed to call a "marketing problem." Daniel was in a unique position having just transferred to our school and to the IB program. During his first two years of high school, he was a student in a magnet program at another school within the same district. He contrasted his experiences in the following way:

At [my previous school], we did a bunch of work. And like, I don't know, I just remember it being fun, I guess. But here, it's kind of like a work culture.... Like, we just do so much work. It's a lot of work. You know, it's just like, it's kind of

like a, how do I put it, like a machine, almost like you just keep working and working and working. Because, you know, it's IB.

Daniel repeated the “because it’s IB” sentiment during his second round interview. He had just returned from a daylong field trip with his IB junior class. They had toured the grounds of the State House, visited the art museum, and gone out to lunch. I asked if he had enjoyed the trip. He responded, “Sure...but of course we had an assignment to do on the trip. Because it’s IB.”

Daniel knew what he was in for when he signed up for IB. He recounted his experience at IB orientation, where his main takeaway from the IB coordinator was that he should expect a heavy load of homework and a heavy load of stress. This characterization of advanced courses as more work and more stress echoed in other participants’ responses: John talked about how he has a good deal of reading homework, Bob talked about how he heard that “IB is really stressful,” and Phil explicitly identified the amount of work as a reason why he chose not to go back into advanced courses when he started high school.

There are ample benefits to advanced courses, but the only one seemingly advertised to students from the adults on campus is rigor—an aspect that, in fact, not all students view as a benefit. As Daniel pointed out and as Phil exemplified, the “work, work, work” message can be off-putting, almost as if the emphasis on rigor is being used as a gate-keeping device. A specific example came up during my interview with Bob, whom I have taught. Having experienced his high capability in English, I was surprised to learn that he had signed up for AP Social Studies and Science courses next year, but

not AP English. When I questioned that choice, he said, “The guidance counselor said that I had to write 700 word essays every week.”

Absent much “marketing” from the school, most participants came to their own understandings of the value of advanced coursework. Their reasons varied widely. One benefit that many were able to articulate to some degree was the GPA boost that advanced coursework can offer. While some did not have the vocabulary to explain this benefit, or to link it clearly to college admissions, all participants were at least vaguely aware that connections existed.

Several students said they simply enjoyed the challenge of advanced coursework. Chris talked about working through the challenge of his Honors Chemistry class in 10th grade —how he struggled at first but prevailed and felt better about himself because of it. Josh talked about how his advanced English courses had made him a better essay writer. David said, “I’d rather a challenge,” contrasting his advanced coursework with the ease of work in non-advanced courses. John said that one of the incentives for him is that “you’ll feel yourself improving.”

A few students talked about the heightened sense of competition and how it made them strive to do better. John admitted that what was originally a source of discomfort when he switched to honors classes became a motivating factor for him: “When I would answer questions versus when they would answer questions, they sounded like they were...much more experienced than I was, and they kind of made me feel like... ‘Am I trying as much as them?’” Similarly, David spoke at length about the motivation he felt when he was in a classroom where he was “competing,” so to speak, with students who

were at his ability level. When asked what he liked about the advanced courses he took in elementary and middle school, he responded:

I ain't the only one knows something. I used to be the first one done in regular class, like...it don't feel good. When you start looking around and, say you doing math, a little worksheet, you be the first one done. You sit 1, 2, 3 minutes like, "Dang, nobody else ain't come up yet? Like, am I doing too much? Do I need to just...sort of be a little step behind?" But when you get in like honors classes you be like, "Okay, this person done before me? And know I'm doing my best? And they done already? Like, what I'm doing wrong?" That's when I get to asking them like, "What you just did? How you did that?" Once you teach me something, I'm gonna try to do it better. Sometimes you need somebody who better than you to make you do something better. ...You not number one. You not trying to teach them cause they already know better than you. And it ain't no more teaching; you got to learn now. It's different when you're going to regular class, well with me.

David's commentary on both competition and individual accountability reflect an appreciation of the intellectual benefits offered in advanced courses that I heard from several participants. Interestingly, though, David also articulated a benefit of honors courses that none of the other participants explored:

In regular classes, the teacher might be like, "Oh, he know it all." Like, "He tryin' a correct me." ...When I got to the AAP classes, they liked me better. ...Like, they wanted me there. Like, they were *seeing* me. It was like, "He doing something with hisself." They wanted me there.

The implications of this quote are striking. David's observation that his teachers in his middle school advanced courses *saw* him and "liked [him] better" suggest a sense of engagement and belonging that he later admitted he did not come close to finding in his high school career of non-advanced coursework.

The wide array of responses show that participants valued advanced coursework for reasons far beyond just rigor. Daniel's assessment of the problematic "work work work" strategy of recruitment provided an insightful summary:

So usually, a tactic of trying to like recruit people to join a magnet program is that, you know, you don't just say, "Oh, the work is going to be a lot." You try to say, "Oh, we go on field trips. And we do this and do that." And I feel like for honors classes, and AP and IB, I feel like they basically advertise themselves as like, work, work work. And so that kind of drives people away. So I feel like they could do – we could do – a better job with advertising honors classes as not just a place for work work work but a place you can have fun, and also, like, gain an advantage to get into better colleges.

Although Daniel questioned the "work work work" marketing strategy, he and his family were so confident in their choice of the IB program as the best fit for him that Daniel transferred from his previous school where he was ranked second in his class to our school where he is currently ranked 23rd in his class. Clearly, Daniel saw intellectual benefits to the program despite sacrificing his class rank, despite being the only Black male in the junior IB class, and despite the level of stress and work. He was willing nevertheless to make the switch, and he acknowledged the worthwhile fun and advantages.

John echoed sentiments similar to Daniel's: When asked about how the school could make advanced coursework seem like a more desirable option, he advised, "Don't make honors classes seem too difficult —like obviously honors classes...you're gonna have to work harder for them. But...try to be like, 'This is the incentive for it.'"

Guidance, Advisement, and the Identification/Notification Process

"Maybe they knew more than me." — David

Another pattern that emerged during discussions was a striking mismatch between students' experiences and the overarching structures intended to help guide their academic choices: both the gifted identification and notification process, and the advisement they receive from their guidance counselors.

The identification criteria for gifted eligibility discussed previously are outlined in Appendix A. The district sends letters to the guardian of every second-grade student in the district outlining the gifted identification process and using CogAT and/or Raven's test scores to identify each and every student as eligible or not eligible for gifted classes. The district's AAP coordinator said that those letters are the only district-wide notification protocol, and that they are sent out to any student who later qualifies based on the stated criteria even after second grade. She also stated that if the student chooses not to enroll in advanced coursework, they must return a form with a parent/guardian signature that indicates they are responsible for notifying the school if they change their minds.

Participants' responses to the question, "When and how did you first find out you were eligible for advanced classes?" showcased discrepancies in relation to the district

notification protocol. Knowing that second grade was a long time ago for these high school students, I asked two parents myself and asked other participants to follow up with their parents. I hoped to hear some semblance of consistency in district protocol, but there does not seem to be any. Bob was the only one of my 10 participants who said that he remembers getting notification from the district around second or third grade based on standardized test scores.

The other participants' experiences varied widely. Daniel said, "It was kind of my dad...He knew that I was really, really gifted. So basically, he has been pushing me ever since." Guy recalled making the choice on his own: "I picked honors. [Because] I know, I know that I can do honors. And I will be good at honors." John recalled, "My fifth-grade teacher came up to me and said, 'This is your choice, I'm not gonna force you to do this, but we have some advanced courses that you can take.'" Josh said that he, too, was approached by some of his teachers at some point during middle school about the possibility of advanced coursework. For David, too, the process was initiated through teacher contact:

When I got to the third grade, the teacher really shook me down and was like, "You already knew this stuff in first grade," and then that's when I got in that AAP class. ...And after that I got up to middle school, but they didn't put me in no AAP classes. At first. No AAP classes coming out of elementary. Like, everybody who was...maybe they knew more than me. They was in AAP classes. I got to middle school and I wasn't.

David said that after his first few days of middle school, he did return to advanced courses, but he cannot recall who initiated that change. However, his next transition also

proved detrimental to that advanced course path: When he started ninth grade, unbeknownst to him, he was placed in all CP courses. He actually thought that his math class was honors-level because he had taken Algebra in eighth grade and was enrolled in Geometry —typically a 10th-grade class —as a ninth grader. However, he found out at the end of his ninth-grade year that his Geometry class was a CP class, not an honors one: “I thought by being a class ahead in math I was better, but I wasn't.” At that point, he said, his guidance counselor did try to talk to him about taking advanced courses again, but he had lost interest.

Phil was first notified of his eligibility for gifted English in sixth grade: “My mom put me in the class because they said and she said I tested high enough.” Like David, though, Phil’s access to gifted services was interrupted: He was removed from gifted English in either his seventh or eighth grade year because, he says, he was not doing anything during the virtual schooling necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. When I asked him who made that decision and why, he said, “The school. Because my grades was lower. Well, lower than the others.” I asked him if his guidance counselor at our high school had had any conversations with him about the fact that he was still state-identified as gifted. Phil said, “Yeah. He was like, ‘You have the...you tested high enough to be in advanced classes, but...your grades don't reflect it.’”

One anomaly was Chris, who skipped a portion of second grade; he said that when he came to the United States from Nigeria, “[someone at the school] looked at my test scores and my grades and decided to bump me up” to third grade. Despite this decision, and despite scoring in the 99th percentile on the Raven’s test —which alone would have qualified him for gifted classes —he said he was never explicitly told that he

qualified. He said, “In middle school, I couldn't really do honors. I don't think...I wasn't up to par with, like, grades.” It was not until he signed up for his 10th-grade classes, he said, that he “decided to do Chemistry Honors. My guidance counselor kinda suggested it because I told her about my plans after high school.”

Collin's experience differs dramatically. He recalled, “We got a phone call. I was in sixth grade, when we were choosing my schedule. They gave us an option saying from my test scores saying that I was eligible for honors English.” Collin cannot recall if that phone call came from a guidance counselor or from a teacher.

The most disturbing answer to my question about identification and notification was the one I received from Jelly and his mom, who do not recall receiving a letter and who said no one had ever told them that he qualified for gifted classes based on his second-grade test scores. In fact, Jelly was in disbelief when I approached him for my study initially; he did not understand what a study about gifted Black males would have to do with him.

Another process that, like gifted-eligible notification, seems to need some improvements is that of counseling students to understand the benefits of advanced coursework. When I asked the participants about the benefits of taking advanced coursework, most of them in one way or another cited a GPA-related benefit. Some understood what a weighted GPA was and how it could relate to college admissions and scholarships. Guy, who wants to go to Columbia University, said, “I think their acceptance rate is either 3% or .3%. And know that if I apply there, I would have to have . . . like . . . very good grades. AP class or honors class, you have a higher GPA.” Josh commented, “There's a lot of credit that you can get from, or college credit, you can get

from those classes.” While a little less clear than Guy’s answer, Josh’s answer makes sense because he has taken both dual enrollment and AP courses.

Other participants were less clear on the definition of credits and weighted GPA and how those concepts would be important for their four-year college goals. Collin said that colleges factored into his decision to remain in advanced courses because “I know colleges look at that. Look at stuff like that sometimes, the credits, things like that.” Phil said, “With a higher class, you get to graduate, you get more credit, or something like that. It looks good. For college?” His inflection went up and he furrowed his brow at the end of his answer, which came off as more of a question than a definitive response. Jelly also phrased his answer as more of a series of questions, saying,

I feel like if you're in gifted, or honors, you have a lot more opportunities in school than being in a normal class. I don't...I don't really know how to put it in words, but...maybe credits? Or something like that? High school...isn't it called high school credits? You get a lot more of those? Maybe. I don't really know too much of that stuff.

Aside from unclarity on weighted GPAs, some participants also seemed unclear on which courses they had signed up for, such as David’s experience with Geometry. Jelly, for example, told me that one of his goals for next year was to take at least one honors-level class, but when I asked him if he had signed up for one at his annual meeting with his guidance counselor, he said, “I can’t really remember. Probably not.”

John, who had previously been in a gifted math class in earlier years, but is currently enrolled only in Honors Biology and English, said, “When I went to my guidance counselor, she said I could actually go back into honors, the honors math next

year.” We were unable to establish a clear reason why he had been unable to take honors math this year; he seems to have followed the same path as David: He did take Algebra 1 in eighth grade, but instead of going into Geometry Honors, he ended up in Geometry CP without realizing it. He did say that his guidance counselor told him, “[Taking Algebra 2 Honors] will give you better academic opportunities than if you were going to normal Algebra 2.” A few other students —David, Chris, and Collin —mentioned that their guidance counselors had made similar suggestions and encouraged them to take advanced classes.

Bob’s experiences had been more negative. He recounted an experience with a guidance counselor when he was signing up for his ninth-grade classes. He said that when he and his parents registered him for honors courses, the guidance counselor questioned that decision, saying that it might be too much work for him. He said his parents argued with the guidance counselor, who eventually gave in. He cannot recall if this experience happened with a counselor from our school or one from his middle school. It was further compounded by another more recent instance:

Did you know you could take physics as a sophomore? I did not know that. Like...I did not know that. At all. All my other friends who are in physics, who were in my other classes, were like, they was like, “Yeah, you didn't know that, man?” Because everybody's in physics *and* chemistry. I didn't even know you could take physics. I think that, like, I think they told them at the guidance thing, like, it was something that like...a lot of them have older siblings. So they probably told them. I didn't. I'm just going in by myself. So I don't know. And nobody told me. I would have took it if I knew.

Bob raised his eyebrows in disbelief, shook his head, and punctuated each word in his repeated, “I. Did. Not. Know. That.” He still seemed upset by this revelation, an experience that placed him on the outside of a circle of inner knowledge, shared with him by neither his peers nor his guidance counselor.

The contrast between Guy’s experience and Bob’s experience is particularly telling. Guy has two older siblings who went to our school, one of whom graduated from the IB program and went on to attend Harvard. His brothers have helped him navigate some of his high school decision-making. This trajectory is in stark contrast to Bob, who very clearly articulated, “I’m just going in by myself. So I don’t know.”

Being the Odd One Out

“People might write off what I say.” — Josh

“I had to change.” — Phil

Most of the participants were acutely aware that they were in a disproportionately small minority in their advanced coursework. They recounted several ways that their experiences specifically in advanced classrooms made them feel like the odd ones out. Speaking about his experience in an honors English class in sixth grade, Phil said, “There was like three Black kids in that class” of approximately 20-25 students. John said, “Yeah, there's literally no way to sugarcoat it: There's just way more White people.” Bob recounted his observation that as he moved from elementary to middle to high school, the disproportionality became worse:

I mean, like when we first got in [to gifted courses], like third grade, they were [more diverse]. But as you go up, like as you go up in the system, like in middle

school, it was like two Black people in my classes. And my classes in high school...it's s like...none. It's just common, like I got used to it.

Josh and Daniel were in uniquely rare positions in this regard. Josh was the only Black male in his AP Language & Composition class. Daniel was the only Black male in the IB program. In fact, Daniel said, it is not just the combination of his race and gender that make him unique: In several classes, he is the only person of color at all. "I guess it's kind of weird and shocking," he said.

Bob's comment that he "got used to it" perfectly captures the degree to which these students have normalized being in an extreme minority. While they are, again, acutely aware, they let it fade into the background as much as they can. Many of them, though, were able to identify specific ways their "difference" was called out or exaggerated, whether intentional or not.

A few participants recalled Black teachers' explicitly telling them that they were representatives of their race in their advanced courses, so they had to do well. Collin remembered one such instance during his ninth-grade year. He explained that the comment made him feel "a little bit of pressure because of how people see you when you go into an honors class, like...a stereotype." Phil, too, had a Black teacher in his sixth-grade advanced class who "was like, 'You see how many of *us* are in here? You have to... You have to...what's the word.... You have to represent us.'"

Phil, like Collin, said this made him feel pressured: "She said that almost every time we had like a project or something. She was like, 'Remember, you're representing all of us, so...' I was like, dang, what if I do bad, and everybody else does good?" This phenomenon would not apply to

the majority of the White students in the class, and it is a heavy burden to put on the backs of students who are the odd ones out from the moment they walk into the room.

One student, Bob, seemed to put that burden on himself. Bob shared that he feels an obligation to prove to his classmates not just his own worth, but that of his whole race:

I feel like I have to succeed sometimes so I can show like not all Black people are dumb. Like, I tested pretty high in my AP World History. I was always like in the top five of the class on like tests....I would just feel like I had to do that so I was just like, "I'm not dumb."

Another way that a few participants said they felt like the odd one out during class was during their back-to-school discussions in August or in January after returning from winter break. Phil recalled, "They talkin' bout like summer camps and boating and all that other stuff. I'm like, 'Wow, that's crazy. That sounds fun. I just sit home.'" For Bob, too, these conversations felt awkward:

My experiences weren't the same...like going golfing, going on a ski trip, going to the mountains, like we don't do like that. I don't do nothing. Probably like, stay at home most of it. Might go to a basketball tournament for my brother, go to my uncle's house in Oklahoma. That's about it.

Both Phil and Bob acknowledged that they never really knew what to say during those discussions when it was their turn to talk.

Another way that participants were made to feel like the odd ones out was the degree to which they had to change the way they talked and acted to fit in with the other people in the room. Phil noticed this shift from the time he was in sixth grade. He said he started talking "more proper" in his honors class. When I asked why, he replied,

I couldn't talk that much without sounding weird. ...The people I was working with didn't understand me, so I had to change. I was like in sixth grade. "What'd you say?" They just kept saying that over and over. The next year I had to stop talking like that. Around people I didn't know or who wouldn't understand.

Phil also acknowledged that he had to tamp down his natural energy in his honors classes, where any non-conforming behavior was more noticeable.

Bob, too, somehow sensed that same "I had to change" sentiment – and around the same time as Phil. He said that around seventh grade, he realized that he was using "two different tones of voice. Like when I'm around my friends I talk with a more like relaxed vibe. And around class, like in class, my AAP classes, I don't...I talk like more scholarly...I'll talk proper." This sense of having to change one's own way of being or speaking to avoid being the odd one out is certainly an adaptive coping strategy, but it places an extra burden on marginalized students to change themselves in order to assimilate.

Daniel, too, noticed himself changing his speech to fit into his advanced courses. He is self-aware of his code-switching, and he offered a motivation aside from just fitting in: "I'm still doing it from like, you know, out of courtesy, but I've relaxed a little bit. Not too much." When I asked about the phrase "out of courtesy" —as in, out of courtesy for whom? —Daniel said, "My whole IB..." and then trails off. His motivation to make everyone else's experience of interacting with him easier sheds light on another interesting facet of this burden.

A few of the participants explicitly acknowledged feelings of isolation and loneliness in their advanced classrooms. Guy conceded those feelings as part of the trade-

off of advanced coursework: “Well...the classes have more advantages and benefits than, like being lonely.” Daniel has developed a specific strategy of intentional networking as an antidote to those feelings of isolation or loneliness:

Try, even though you might not want to do it, like try to be friends with the uh...the Caucasians. Because if you don't, you're gonna be excluded out of a lot of stuff. So it's like, even if it is just simply, "Hey, what's up? How's your day been?" Just something simple to like, have like a little connection so that you don't feel isolated every class.

Aside from some coping strategies they use to fit in, many of the students employ a very specific coping strategy to avoid standing out: Almost all participants avoid asking questions or asking for help. Bob said, “I don't like to ask questions a lot. I don't want to look dumb.” Josh said, “I just feel like I’m holding the class back by me not understanding.” David simply said, “I don’t ask questions.” Josh and John both said they are willing to ask questions later in a one-on-one setting with their teacher, but they avoid asking in front of others. John went into more specific detail:

If it's something that's simple to other people and I don't get it, I often just wait until I have my own opportunity to get to ask the teacher by myself. Because I don't like being the only one to, you know, not understand something that's supposed to be, like, easy. That's more true in my higher level classes. I feel like I can't ask some questions because a lot of other people know the answer to that question. And I don't feel smart not knowing the answer to that question when they do. So I feel like asking the question would put me, put me in a bad position.

All participants acknowledged that, to some degree, they make an effort to avoid asking questions —particularly when they are in advanced courses.

Group work was an area where participants' experiences varied widely. Some had teachers who were intentional in creating diverse groups and ensuring everyone was learning and growing in those groups; David in particular had one positive experience in middle school:

When I got in eighth grade, the AAP Math class, she put me like with a person, like cause I came in there late, like, they switched me over. She put me with a person. And then she was like, that'd be somebody good to help you. Because like, I ain't want to talk to nobody. I was just doing the work fast, turning it in.

She was like, "No, you need somebody to talk to." She put me with a girl. And it was straight.

He had much to say about his eighth grade AAP Math teacher and her efforts to help him feel like he fit in. He said that there were times where he would start trying to work alone, and she would not let him:

I'd be like, "I'm straight, I'll just do it myself." But she'd be like, "No, you don't need to do it yourself." I liked that. Because like, she put me with somebody, and they made me friends with they friends.

This was not true for all of David's advanced classes; he said of other classes, "If I ain't had no group, I'd just do it myself," indicating that there were times when the teacher assigned group work, but whatever social forces were at work in the classroom resulted in him working alone.

Some participants had alienating experiences more in line with Phil's experience discussed earlier, where his small group claimed they could not understand him until he code-switched. Collin explained a specific instance of group work when "[Two White girls] were just doing the work. And I was kind of just there." Phil remembered that he used to try to pick his own racially homogeneous group: "We just stuck together any time it was like a group project. I'd just pick those three. We used to do stuff together. The whole project together." Phil contrasted this with the times when his teacher would select a group where he had to work with White students: "I wasn't....I wasn't doing a lot of work with them kids. Cause they just doing everything. Because they're friends. They do everything together. I'm just, like, adding on to it, like a little bit."

Other students had similar experiences to Collin and Phil when they found themselves in a group of people that did not look like them. Guy, for example, admitted, "Sometimes it can be dysfunctional." He recounted an instance where one person did not seem to want to work with him: "They wanted to, like, do the whole project themselves and like, they would change my ideas a bit."

Josh admitted that group work is sometimes so uncomfortable that he basically opts out:

People might write off what I say. So I just stay quiet...I'm not sure if it's more the classes or just me, but there's some times where I just feel like I can't really talk to people. And I just end up staying to myself to do the work instead of talking to someone else or trying to work with someone else... It's mostly just that I feel out of place....I try to talk to people but mostly I just end up being too quiet

for someone to hear me. I just...see if I can stay in the corner and see if I can help anyway, while staying quiet.

Many of the honors students in particular loved having a more diverse class in their schedule; gym, for example, was a class they enjoyed —not because activity and athletics were involved, but because they felt like group interactions were more pleasant and meaningful experiences for them there than they were in their advanced classes. John explained, “In gym, there's often a lot of activities where you have to work together to, you know, win. And when you're doing that, you kind of have to put aside the differences.” Bob enjoyed gym because it allowed him to meet new people:

Like, a lot of new people, because our PE class was almost all seniors. I was like the only sophomore in my class. So I got to like talk to them about what their experiences were and their opinion. It's different than what you normally get.

Even beyond the advanced course classrooms, some participants either directly or indirectly acknowledged some degree of isolation or of being the odd one out. Five out of the 10 participants always eat lunch alone; one other occasionally eats lunch alone. Only one, Chris, said that he intentionally eats alone because he is an introvert who craves that peace in the middle of the day. The other five did not necessarily feel that eating alone is always a bad thing, but they admitted it was not what they expected high school lunch to be, and/or that it is not what they would choose if they had a choice. A few of those students had made some strides toward finding some lunch friends, but a recent schedule change to two lunches (instead of the former one-lunch system) had reduced their options.

Self-Perceptions

“It was my fault. It wasn't nobody else. ...I kind of wish I never was in no class with my friends. The whole time, like, it's like, I messed up myself, because I started playing. I messed up.” — David

All participants except for Jelly strongly self-identified with their academic or intellectual giftedness. John explained that his identity as an honors student permeates his approach to work even in his CP classes: “My default, I kind of, I try to work the same way I work in honors classes. I try to put in the same level of work I put into honors classes into the CP classes.” Chris explained, “I love a challenge.” Collin said that what makes him an honors student is “intelligence. And I’m hard working, and willing to try new things.” Bob knows his capabilities; he explained that advanced classes “are not really hard, honestly.” Guy explained, “In Montessori, we went at our own pace. And like, I would be doing like, in the second grade, I would be doing fifth grade stuff. [So in ninth grade,] I picked honors. I knew that I can do honors.” David loved the challenge of exercising his giftedness in his advanced classes:

Once you teach me something, I'm gonna try to do it better. Sometimes you need somebody who better than you to make you do something better. ...Going in, you're not doing it better than everybody. You're not number one. You're not trying to teach them cuz they already know better than you. And it ain't no more teaching, you got to learn now. It's different when you're going to regular class, well with me.

As David’s explanation exemplifies, even the students who were not currently enrolled in advanced courses knew that they were capable, and their non-enrollment in advanced

courses did not compromise their self-perceptions. David went on to explain that even when he dropped down to non-advanced coursework, “The stuff we was learning, I already knew it. We’d do the work, I’d be the first one done.” When I asked Phil if he ever got bored in CP classes, he responded without hesitation, “Of course.” Both David and Phil have a strong sense of their own intelligence and capabilities.

The only hint that Phil may be struggling with his own sense of giftedness is when, in discussing why some people who are gifted choose not to take advanced classes, he said, “Maybe some of them decided to stay in grade level classes because they think it’s gonna be too hard. Just like I did when I signed up here.” When I asked him to expand on what he meant by “too hard,” he shrugged and said, “Too much work.” Again, even though his answer hints at a sense of fear, that fear lies in whether or not he wants to assume the workload – not in his ability level.

David provided a compelling example of someone whose gifted identity is still ingrained in him even though he has not taken advanced courses since middle school. In fact, David shared a very early memory in which he felt disillusioned when his belief in his math competence was shaken: During a math competition in first grade, he came in second place, and the student who came in first place got skipped up to second grade a few days later. David attributed some of his frustration with school to this event: “In first grade, after he beat me and stuff, like, I ain’t even trip, but like I fell back because he got stepped up for real. Like off that one little thing. Like I just fell back, wasn’t really caring too much, was like a troublemaker, doing bad things.”

Despite attributing some of his behaviors to his frustration over that one event, David blamed his lack of high school advanced coursework on himself throughout our interviews. He repeatedly said that he knows he is capable, particularly in math, and that it was his own choice —and perhaps a questionable one —to forego advanced courses. His cumulative responses stacked up, reiterating this idea: “I never really asked for AAP. I never really...It was my fault. It wasn’t nobody else;” “Enjoying my freshman year, not thinking, not listening to [my guidance counselor]....It was my fault. Wanted to be a kid, wanted to still play;” “If I never would have [played around], high school...you know, maybe would have been different. Maybe would have been better;” “It was my fault. I could have just did the work, not talked to anybody. I could have did it;” and “I should have switched classes. I had the option. Still chose not to because I wanted to be funny, wanted to be with those students. So. My fault.”

David did occasionally acknowledge that peer pressure factored into his choices in high school, as in that final quote, but he still placed the control and the blame on himself. He expressed a regret, unprompted, as we wrapped up our first interview:

I kind of wish I never was in no class with my friends. The whole time, like, it's like, I messed up myself, because I started playing. I messed up. But I could have had help, though. But I never did.

Again, at no point did David seem to doubt his intelligence; he merely regretted his choices, still seeing his intelligence as an asset that could have helped him.

Jelly was the one exception – the one student who did not strongly self-identify as smart or capable. He was the one student who had never taken advanced courses and had never been made aware that he qualified for them. When I initially asked him to describe

a typical honors student, he said, “A really focused, hard-working student.” When asked if that applied to him, Jelly laughed at length before he said definitively, “Absolutely not.” As he was my own student, I was able to observe prior to the beginning of the study that Jelly thrived on my praise and did not always seem to know whether he had done something well or not until I reinforced it for him. Even during our interviews, there were times when he needed me to confirm that he was smart. When I brought up an insightful analogy he made between the institution of college athletics and the institution of slavery during a research project earlier in the year – an analogy he articulated with insight rare for any ninth grader – he said, “Is that [analogy] a smart thing?” When he had trouble identifying something he was proud of this year, I brought up his improvement in our class and the fact that he was finishing the year with an A. He responded, “You think I’m good at English?” with incredulity, then – softly, just loudly enough that the mic picked it up – whispered, “Yessss!” to himself.

Although most participants other than Jelly did have a very strong sense of their own intelligence and strong academic identification, many still lived in fear that others would doubt their abilities. Those fears were on display in their responses to questions about whether or not they were willing to ask questions during class, as explored in a previous section. Those fears were also on display in their responses to my questions about group work, also discussed previously. For example, Josh said,

I kind of don't talk as much because I get scared that I might mess up or something and be thought of as I don't usually get things right. ... I get scared I might mess up or get something wrong. People might write off what I say. So I just stay quiet.

Despite their generally strong sense of academic identification, a few of the participants defined a typical honors student as the diametric opposite of them. Phil, without a moment's hesitation after I posed the question, said that a typical honors student at our school was "a White girl." Bob responded similarly, expanding a bit: "I'd probably say...a White girl. Because like it feels like that's like the smart...you know what I mean? Like they're the ones that usually like lead the class and ask questions."

Community: Peer and Adult Support and Belonging

"Most friend groups like, the different races, they stay with the race that they are, essentially. They don't try to make it diverse." — Collin

"I think some people care, but most of them don't care about me." — Phil

*"You should have had a male teacher your color. And I ain't had that since elementary."
— David*

Participants' answers revealed important aspects of their perceptions of school-wide culture. One thing that became clear very quickly was the sense of segregation that exists between advanced students and non-advanced students. Daniel said he only had three friends who were not in the IB program, and that they all took AP courses. Guy said he was friends with other honors students, and he cannot think of any friends who take any core CP classes. Jelly said he does not know anyone who is taking any honors classes this year. Phil was able to identify one friend who is in honors classes, but then backtracked and said he was not even sure that she was in honors classes because "we don't really talk anymore." Perhaps this phenomenon of segregation-by-course-level accounts for why Bob and John both enjoyed their gym classes, as discussed in a

previous section. Because there is no such thing as Honors PE, that is an example of a course that is heterogeneously mixed.

Because our course levels are largely divided along racial lines, the segregation-by-course-level reflects racial segregation as well. Even some of the students who said they did not see racism as an issue at our school acknowledged examples of racial segregation when I asked them about their lunch groups. Collin, for example, eats lunch with his friends from the football team, which he said happens to be a diverse crowd on his A-days, but he said is more segregated on B-days just by the nature of scheduling. He observed that segregation is more common than not when he looks around at lunch: “Most friend groups, like, the different races, they stay with the race that they are, essentially. They don't try to make it diverse.” Bob’s experience reflects a similar theme; he said of his lunch crowd and his social group in general, “It's a bunch of Black people. I don't eat lunch with White people. That's who I fit in with most. That's who I hang with outside of school.” Phil, too, eats lunch with a group of other Black males. And as discussed earlier, several participants eat lunch alone.

David provided the only counterexample to these accounts of segregation. He said that particularly at sporting events, he finds himself interacting with all kinds of students—all academic levels and all races—in meaningful ways. However, when I asked about his lunch group, he said, “I sit with my color type.”

A couple of the students recounted memories of a teacher or coach who intentionally tried to racially integrate students. Bob, for example, reflected on his eighth-grade football coach:

It was like all the Black kids sit in a group over here. And all the White kids in a group over here. He was like, he said, "No." He made us sit Black, White, Black, White, Black, White. The whole season.

Although Bob did say that his true friend group consisted of other Black males, he also said that he met at least one White student through his football coach's efforts that he is still friendly with to this day—a student with whom Bob socializes and works in honors classes.

Just as David recalled how a teacher intentionally paired him with a peer to help him feel connected, Phil cited another instance of intentional efforts by an adult to push back on some of the segregation in the honors class he took:

I liked the teacher.... She tried to help us fit in to the class, kinda. She like kind of forced us to work with other people instead of like grouping us three [Black students] together, she like spread us out.

It is worth noting that all three examples—Bob's, David's, and Phil's—of adults who tried to make them feel like part of a larger, integrated community were from their middle school years.

Relationships between these students and adults on our campus ran the gamut. One of my interview questions was, "Can you name an adult at this school who would have your back if you were in a tough spot?" Guy, Collin, and Phil said no. Guy did recall that he had one at his middle school: "He was actually my neighbor. And then his wife was also my teacher. And she used to push me a lot." Collin was able to cite examples from both his elementary and middle schools, but not our high school. Phil was hard-pressed to think of a supportive adult, coming up empty-handed. Other participants

named supportive adults, although some only after several seconds. John named his English teacher (a White woman); Chris named his guidance counselor (a White woman); Jelly named his science teacher (an AAPI woman); Daniel named one of his IB elective teachers (a White woman); Bob named his wrestling coach (a White man). David named a few people: his career counselor (a Black woman) and three different teachers (all Black women).

In addition to their commentary about relationships with faculty, participants' comments about their peer relationships capture important facets of their perceptions of our school culture. Earlier sections discussed the degree to which some of the participants felt isolated in their honors classes; additionally, I discussed earlier in this section the fact that several participants eat lunch alone, and that most others eat in segregated groups. Several participants commented specifically on peer relationships and school culture within classrooms.

Speaking of classroom culture in general at our school, Phil said, "I think some people care, but most of them don't care about me." He shared that comment in a focus group, where Collin agreed with him: "Like, if it's a class discussion, then most of the kids in the class, they just want to get through the class. They're not like really paying attention to what you say." Daniel, too, conveyed a sense of peer apathy based on his experience in his advanced classes at our school: "If one person gets a good grade, and everyone else fails, they don't really care, as long as they get a good grade."

Interestingly, Daniel's previous experiences of feeling isolated took a turn as the year drew to a close—a turn for perhaps both the better and the worse:

Towards the end of the year, since we all basically, I don't know how to put it, but...we've all basically lost our minds due to IB. I feel like [differences] have kind of been, like, overlooked. And I've kind of been assimilated a little bit into it. When I asked Daniel if he viewed that outcome in a positive light, he shrugged and said, "Well...[the stress] unraveled everyone's minds."

Beyond the classroom, some participants talked about relationships, adult or peer, that they had developed through extracurricular activities. Several were student-athletes. However, three total participants had not found extracurricular ways to plug into our school community. David was one of those. He very fondly recalled the Boys Club that an elementary teacher had formed for him and his friends:

We ended up getting a basketball team. We ended up getting everything our elementary didn't have. We got everything we asked for. Everything. But he tried.

Like we wanted to go on trips? Did that. We don't get that much no more.

However, David said that he has not engaged in a single extracurricular activity at our school in all four years: "No. At all. It ain't me. I ain't got into it. It ain't them not trying. I just ain't into it."

Recognizing that our staff demographics do not match our student body demographics, I wondered whether or not participants noticed this and included the interview question, "Can you name three Black male teachers at this school?" (At the time of interviews, we had four Black male certified teachers on staff.) Jelly, John, Phil, Daniel, and Guy could not name a single Black male teacher. Phil and Daniel both laughed a little cynically when I asked the question. Daniel talked at length about how he had not had a single Black teacher at all since he has been at our school. He shared,

I was in my government class last semester, and I just like took a second to, like, look at all my teachers and realized that the closest person to a minority is [a non-American teacher of his]. And she's White.

Phil started reminiscing about past Black teachers and slowly noticed a trend after I asked, identifying the last time he had a Black male teacher as second grade. He repeated himself, seemingly in awe: "Dang that's crazy. I just realized that. Dang that's crazy. I don't got no Black male teachers."

Collin, Bob, and Josh were able to identify two Black male teachers at our school by name. Bob is currently enrolled in an Engineering class on campus with a Black male teacher, and he said that is the first time he has ever had a Black male teacher; however, he also shared that his dad is a teacher. Chris was able to name one Black male teacher at our school, whom he had for art the year prior; before that, though, he thinks sixth grade was the last time he had a Black male teacher. David could only name one Black male teacher he had ever had. Like Phil, David came to the sudden realization that this experience seemed strange, and began to recall the impact his one Black male teacher had on him:

You should have had a male teacher your color. And I ain't had that since elementary. ...He helped us like cuz where I'm from...I ain't gonna lie. That's why I say, like, second grade, first grade, all, messed me up. Been getting in trouble, been doing dumb things. But when he came, second grade, he stopped me from a lot.

Bob, too, recalled two influential Black teachers from elementary and middle school:

“They were both Black females and I think they pushed me more because like I was the only Black in the class. So they wanted me to succeed.”

Microaggressions and Implicit Racism

“It’s like an underwhelming...it’s not right in the face.” — Bob

*“I’m pretty sure there are, like, capable Black teachers that can do the IB program,
so...it’s weird.” — Daniel*

When I asked participants if they thought racism was an issue at our school, most of them said no. Jelly said he thought his CP classes were “even” with respect to race, as did Phil. John said he thought administrators treated everyone the same, and regardless of race, “they deal out the same punishments.” Collin said of adults on campus, “It’s like they want everybody to be equal, so I would say [Black masculinity] is valued but not more than anybody else.” When I asked during a focus group if they felt anyone had certain expectations of them based on their identity as Black males, Phil and Collin’s exchange was interesting:

Phil: They want you to act like a big, tough...sometimes. People expect you to act tough. Mostly students.

Collin: Students and teachers.

Phil: Act like a grown-up.

Collin: More mature.

Phil: But all males, not necessarily Black males.

Two exceptions —two students who did see racism as somewhat of an issue — were Daniel and Bob. Both cited basic definitions of implicit racism. Daniel said, “You

don't really notice it at first until you pay attention." Bob said, "It's like an underwhelming...it's not right in the face."

Daniel, who felt that racism was somewhat of an issue, noted about the student make-up of our IB program, "How is it that we don't have, you know, another Black male?" Later, he noted, "I don't have a single Black teacher. I don't know how that happened. I'm pretty sure there are, like, capable Black teachers that can do the IB program, so...it's weird." Daniel also recounted an experience where he specifically wanted a Black IB Extended Essay supervisor for his chosen topic of Black History Month, but only two trained supervisors (out of roughly 40) are Black. Course make-up, faculty demographics, and the distribution of advanced courses among faculty members all convey some implicit racism.

Daniel also shared that whenever he gets a high score on a test, his classmates are, like, so shocked and surprised. Their tone kind of comes off patronizing in a way because like, usually, if someone else smart did that, they would be like, "Oh, oh, of course you did it," but like if I do it it's like, "Oh my gosh, that's like so unexpected."

Bob had two anecdotes to explain his answer about "underwhelming" racism, one from an interaction with a substitute teacher, and one with a guidance counselor:

I remember one time a sub thought I was in the wrong class [in an advanced class]. I also remember when I was doing my [course registration] the lady said to me, like, "This class would be too hard for you," and she was trying not to let me take it. I don't know, but...she just filled in my form. She said, "This might be too

hard for him.” ... They had argued with my parents to let me take it. I took the course anyway.

Bob relayed an incident where he walked into one of his advanced classes, and the teacher was absent, so a substitute was there, standing at the door to greet students. The substitute said, “I think you’re in the wrong class” when Bob rounded the corner to enter.

Bob said that when he walks into an advanced class, he can “see the separation.” This is in line with some his earlier comments about his out-of-class and out-of-school peer groups. He said of his advanced classmates, “I don’t talk to them outside of class.” He also shared an observation he had made about his teachers in advanced classes:

People were struggling in their classes, and the teachers didn’t ask. ... Like they focus on a majority of the group, and like the people who fall behind, who were Black ones, most of the time, they didn’t have like the help they needed, so it was causing them to fall behind and drop out the class. ... [They should] actually put more time on the individual than group.

Finally, in my conversations with three of my participants, a pattern emerged that may suggest a skewed power dynamic that I cannot help but examine from my CRT perspective: They punctuated almost every sentence with “ma’am.” This pattern was true mostly for the students who did not know me before. In his first interview, Chris used 29 “ma’am”s in 13 minutes; in his second, 15 in 12 minutes. In his first interview, David used 20 “ma’am”s in 26 minutes; in his second, 16 in 12 minutes. In his first interview, Guy used 19 “ma’am”s in 25 minutes; in his second, 5 in 11 minutes.

Cultural Relevance: One Size Does Not Fit All

Advice from Bob: “Actually put more time on the individual than group.”

Bob’s advice from the previous section is important in light of CRP. Knowing students as individuals is important in order to design curriculum, instruction, and assessments that will best serve them. What struck me as I conducted these interviews was just how wide-ranging these students’ likes, dislikes, and interests were. Some of the students said they really enjoyed group work; some did not. Some said they enjoyed participating in class discussions; some preferred to stay quiet.

When I asked about writing assignments, Chris, David, and Phil said they liked personal, narrative essays best. Collin went into detail about an argument essay he enjoyed; his self-selected topic was the use of performance enhancing drugs and drug testing for high school athletes. Bob talked about a writing assignment where he had to connect popular songs to a work of literature. Josh talked about how much he has enjoyed learning and growing as a writer of rhetorical analysis essays in AP Language. He cited one rhetorical analysis essay in particular—one he had written on President Obama’s speech for the dedication of a Rosa Parks statue. Guy, too, talked about how he had grown as an analytical writer in his AP World History class; he cited a timed, in-class, document-based question about the Columbian Exchange as his favorite piece of writing in recent memory.

When I asked students about texts they had read and had strong reactions to over the years, again, the answers were wide-ranging. Daniel loved *The Kite Runner*, hated Emily Dickinson’s poetry, and did not love *Persepolis*. Chris loved *Beowulf* for its

“action and adventure” but hated *Frankenstein*. Phil loved *The Trials of Apollo* series by Rick Riordan, which he read during independent reading in middle school. Jelly loved Roald Dahl’s short story “Lamb to the Slaughter.” Both Jelly and Phil hated Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*. Collin loved *Just Mercy* and hated *The Great Gatsby*. Josh described a book he had read for an independent reading project and really enjoyed: *In a Different Key*. David said he always enjoyed independent reading choice, and that he loved when teachers let him go to the library to pick his own books. The Bluford series was a favorite for him. Guy really enjoyed *Born a Crime* and *The Sun Does Shine*, and he did not particularly enjoy *The Scarlet Letter*; however, he did spend a minute talking — unprompted — about which themes from that novel he found still relevant.

Bob, who took my English class the year prior, went into depth with his answer about books he had read. He first talked about why he liked *Just Mercy*:

It gives...like...Black experiences. It's like a Black main character who talks about the struggles that he went through, and it's like a true story. ... You can relate to the characters because when they said they went to the country and had celebrations, like, I do that too. So I was like, I feel like I can relate to that the most.

Bob said he had not enjoyed *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He explained that he did enjoy *Things Fall Apart*, offering the striking perspective, “The dude ended up killing himself at the end, which was a cowardly way to die, which really contrasted with the way that he lived.”

General Findings and Results

Marketing and Incentivizing Advanced Coursework

Students' answers reveal two troubling trends in relation to this theme. First is the trend of rigor being deployed as a gate-keeping device. Bob's examples of a guidance counselor who tried to talk him out of honors courses as he entered ninth grade as well as one who told him that an AP Language class would require weekly 700-word essays—a claim that is patently not true—shine a light on this trend. As participants' comments convey, there is a wide array of benefits to advanced coursework. Ignoring those benefits and instead emphasizing rigor seems disingenuous. Not all participants shared this experience; two, Chris and John, had guidance counselors advise them into advanced courses based on, respectively, their future plans and their previous course enrollment.

Second is the trend of advanced courses being marketed as “work work work” and not in any other meaningful ways. Guidance counselors and other school representatives may not be making other incentives visible to students—incentives like intellectual challenge or weighted GPAs. Many of the participants had their own individual reasons for wanting to take advanced classes—e.g., growth, challenge, competition. They recognized those incentives on their own.

Guidance, Advisement, and the Identification/Notification Process

Students' experiences embody discrepancies and/or unclarity around the district's notification protocol. Some were approached by teachers in seemingly informal ways. Some students' parents seem to have made the decision. Some students were never formally told that their test scores would have made them eligible. Josh was not in our district during middle school, when he says his teachers approached him about gifted

coursework – so I cannot then say that this was a failing of our district alone; it may suggest that our district is not the only place that struggles with consistent notification protocol.

Two copies of a district notification letter sent earlier this year are included in Appendix D. The first letter received by this family stated that the student was not eligible for AAP. The second, which was requested only after the parent noticed that the student's test scores did indeed qualify them for AAP, actually pre-dates the first, and says that the student *is* eligible. Obviously this instance is a dramatic example of an erroneous notification, but it shows a serious flaw in our notification process at the district level. It also raises a question about the stated policy that anyone who is newly identified as gifted gets a letter. The coordinator did not mention rejection letters.

Even then, the letters are hard to read, and the identification of students as gifted or not is buried at the end of the letter. The fact that a parent or guardian would have to receive the district letter (based on the address they provide at registration, which may not be their physical primary residence), read that letter, and understand that letter – which is unwieldy – raises some concerns about whether this is an effective protocol.

One final concern about these letters struck me at a recent district in-service meeting for teachers. The AAP Coordinator for our district presented on gifted identification and programming. She mentioned that the district actually accepts students whose scores are in the 80th-89th percentile into gifted programming. She also said that any student whose scores fall into the 70th-79th percentile can appeal. While casting a broader net could help us catch more gifted students of color, that the letter mailed to

parents or guardians does not include these figures seems disingenuous (see Appendix D).

Another aspect of the identification process that I find troubling is the fact that, once a student opts out of advanced courses, the onus is on the students and families to re-enroll. Once they withdraw from gifted classes, no one checks back in with them. They are asked to sign a form testifying that they understand that initiatingreenrollment is their responsibility.

Like the notification process, students' experiences with guidance counselors also reveal discrepancies. Test scores matter, and apparently some guidance counselors are not using students' test scores to make informed decisions, as was the case with Bob and Phil. Knowing that the notification letters do not always work, guidance counselors stand ready to be the next line of defense in catching our gifted students and helping them gain access to courses that would be appropriately challenging. This process is worrisome, as class registration typically occurs in a hasty fashion. Guidance counselors carry heavy caseloads, and they may not have time to check previous test scores on every student — or, for that matter, to have conversations about weighted GPA and what that means. That lack of awareness of what constitutes a high school credit, what weighted GPA means, and how those relate to college admissions was widespread in students' answers and represents another area for growth for our school.

One interesting contrast in terms of course selection was Bob vs. Guy. Guy's brothers' experiences and advice have helped to build his navigational capital as he makes his way through a system that may not make entirely clear to students which

courses they can or should take, or why weighted GPA matters. Bob, on the other hand, is navigating the advanced course track without the expertise of an older sibling to help him. He seems positioned on the outside of an inner circle that contains information about, for example, what science classes he was eligible to take this year.

Being the Odd One Out

The fact that these students are in the extreme minority in the demographics of their advanced courses not only results in feelings of—in their words— isolation, exclusion, and loneliness; it in and of itself conveys a sense of implicit racism, implying that Black males are somehow academically or intellectually inferior just by the sake of their not being proportionately represented in advanced courses. Furthermore, many of the students are aware of how that disproportionality looks. Some of that student awareness comes from teachers’ pointing out that Black students in advanced level courses are race representatives; some of the awareness comes from the students themselves, as in the cases of Bob and Daniel. Bob in particular knows what that disproportionality implies and how others could use it to support racist beliefs in his unsettling comment about how he cares about his own level of performance as proof that “not all Black people are dumb.”

Many students talked about having to change their personalities or their speech to avoid being the odd one out. Again, this behavior is certainly an adaptive coping strategy – but much like race representation, it places a significant burden on the students who are already in the minority and already feeling isolated, excluded, and lonely. Adaptive as it may be, having to sacrifice one’s ways of being to fit into an environment that does not reciprocate that adaptation seems traumatizing.

Self-Perceptions

Perhaps the most important lesson I observed in relation to this theme is that labels matter. All nine of my participants who knew that they had a gifted label perceived themselves as gifted. Jelly, who never received a gifted label, did not perceive himself as gifted. This contrast was striking.

There is also a striking contrast between the concept of disidentification from the literature and the data I collected from these students. Only David and Phil hinted at some degree of academic disidentification in the ways that they chose to opt out of honors classes —although the degree to which they really chose (i.e., whether it was a choice at all) is questionable. For most participants, their sense of academic identification was high; they did not seem to disidentify with their giftedness or with school. There did seem to be a widespread concern among this group about how others perceived their academic belonging, revealed in their commentary about how they avoid asking questions, for example, or in some of their commentary about how they feel like race representatives.

Another interesting theme in the data set is that most participants had a very strong internal locus of control. They believe in their abilities, and they believe that they make the choices that control how those abilities are used. This stance is somewhat positive, yet it can also result in feelings of guilt, inadequacy, or pressure when forces beyond the students' control seem to conspire against them. David in particular, who emphasized many times that he regretted his academic choices, had a very strong internal locus of control.

Community: Peer and Adult Support and Belonging

One obvious pattern in the data set was considerable course-level social segregation: CP students only really knew and hung out with CP students, and advanced-level students only really knew and hung out with advanced-level students. This division is particularly problematic given that our school's course levels are racially segregated. Mostly Black CP students are familiar with one another, and mostly White advanced students are familiar with one another, resulting in a thorny gray area for some Black advanced students. Some of the students' admissions that they eat lunch alone, or that they sometimes struggle with group work, suggest that our gifted Black students are struggling to fit into the communities created in honors classrooms, both in those rooms and beyond.

There are some success stories – first, our robust athletic program seems to have success in helping students cross racial and course-level barriers. Second, there are adults who have intentionally worked to integrate classrooms or playing fields so that all members value and interact with all members. It is again worth noting that the three participants who recounted instances of intentional integration —Bob, David, and Phil — used examples from middle school, not from our high school, suggesting another possible area for growth and improvement, both inside and outside of the classroom.

There does seem to be a general sense of disconnectedness or student apathy towards other students. Students do not necessarily feel like other students care about their success, or care to seek out friends beyond people who look like they do.

Students' answers about teachers they could approach for support reveal that a wide array of adults, across racial and gender lines, support these students. This finding proves that any adult in the building has the potential to be perceived as a trusted safe space, and that many are successfully building relationships and trust with students. Many of the students did, though, recount experiences specifically with Black teachers who pushed them or made them feel valued. These experiences cannot be underestimated.

Although any adult in the building can provide these students with support, the fact that students cannot see themselves reflected in our faculty make-up is troubling. This disparity is not a problem at our school alone, and the paucity of Black male teachers is yet another example of implicit racism. When we do not have Black male teachers well represented on our faculty, the implication may be that Black males are not capable or valued, or that they do not have a place in academia.

Microaggressions and Implicit Racism

A dispassionate examination of our school's data would lead some to the conclusion that course enrollment demographics, faculty demographics, and the distribution of advanced courses among faculty members all convey some implicit racism. Daniel was the only participant who perceived this reality, though. Many participants reported that they do not think racism is an issue at school. Only a few explained how there is some institutionalized implicit racism. Bob's comment that teachers perhaps do not focus enough on those who fall behind—who are often Black students—is a striking example of perceived implicit racism.

One striking, related phenomenon that seems to be true in this data set is that students do not necessarily seem to notice homogeneity. Chris, Phil, and Jelly all felt like their CP classes were diverse places, or places where race was more evened out. This view is not objectively true, but it is their perception.

Cultural Relevance: One Size Does Not Fit All

Importantly, the data set revealed that essentializing students based on their race and their gender would lead teachers to erroneous conclusions and flawed decision-making. All participants are Black males, yet their preferences and interests were wide-ranging. Their discussions about the books they had loved and hated were lively. Again, as Bob cautioned, worrying about a whole group—whether a class or a demographic group—without tending to the unique attributes of its individual members is counterproductive.

Analysis of Data

What Factors Deter Gifted Black Males from Choosing and Remaining in Advanced Courses?

The primary factors that deter gifted Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced courses are:

1. Marketing of advanced courses that relies solely on rigor and workload.
2. A lack of clarity in communication about how advanced courses impact GPA, what weighted GPA is, and how those two things related to the college application process.
3. Inconsistencies and unclarity in the district identification and notification processes for gifted-eligible students.

4. A lack of protocol for advising previously-gifted-eligible-but-not-currently-enrolled students in targeted ways at regular intervals.
5. Feelings of exclusion, isolation, and loneliness.
6. Pressure to be a representative of one's race.
7. Pressure to change aspects of one's personality to fit into the advanced classroom.
8. A lack of community and connections within and beyond advanced course classrooms.

How Can Teachers Mitigate Some of those Factors Through Curriculum and Pedagogy to Better Serve Gifted Black Male Students?

Interestingly, many of the factors that deter Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced course tracks seem to have little to do with individual teachers and classrooms. Many of the problems have more to do with guidance, district protocols, and systemic issues than they do with individual classrooms. However, the list of factors reveals several key things that teachers can and should do:

1. Teachers are the ones who have the potential to know students best, so they should make recommendations to parents/guardians and to guidance counselors when they feel that any kind of placement should be changed. Any change — whether up a level or down a level — should be accomplished via open dialogue including students, parents/guardians, teachers, and guidance counselors, and that decision should be revisited at an agreed-upon date.
2. Teachers must strive to build community and connections within their advanced courses to minimize the feelings of isolation, exclusion, and loneliness. This approach should include, but is not limited to, closely monitoring group work and

- group dynamics. Several of these students recounted unpleasant experiences with group work where they feel they were excluded from meaningful collaboration and participation for a number of reasons.
3. Teachers should avoid essentializing Black males and should recognize that CRP involves getting to know individual students and their unique interests, strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Teachers must build relationships with their students. They should take Bob's advice to heart and pay attention to individuals, not just to the success of the whole group or to content coverage. While building those relationships with individuals, teachers should not underestimate the power of our words to students. Many students said they chose to do honors classes because their teachers pushed them, "shook [them] down" (in the words of David) or told them they should try an advanced class.

Summary

This chapter documented and described how the data set revealed trends that helped to answer the two research questions. The first question sought to determine what factors deterred gifted Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced courses. Data revealed problems with notification protocol and advisement processes as well as in-classroom factors such as a pressure to change or conform as well as feelings of loneliness and lack of connection. The second question sought to determine what teachers can do through curriculum and pedagogy to mitigate those factors. Data suggested that teachers should be advocates in the identification and advisement processes, strive to build supportive and connected classroom communities in advanced classes, recognize their students as unique individuals, and build relationships with students to support

students and to better inform their own curriculum and pedagogy. In the following chapter, I will further discuss results and will make recommendations.

Chapter 5:

Synthesis and Discussion

This phenomenological qualitative research study relied upon data collected from 10 participants during two rounds of one-on-one interviews and two focus groups. It aimed to investigate the following questions:

1. What factors deter gifted Black males from choosing and remaining in advanced courses?
2. How can teachers mitigate some of those factors through curriculum and pedagogy to better serve gifted Black male students?

The study relied mainly upon a framework of CRT, but a secondary framework of identity formation theory informed my research and analysis as well. Findings suggested problems with the marketing, notification, and advisement processes; strong participant academic self-perceptions despite feelings of exclusion or isolation; and a weak sense of community both in the advanced classrooms and beyond. This chapter will focus on both similarities and discrepancies between the literature review and my findings, grounded in CRT; my reflections on the process of action research; my action plan for using the results of my study to be an agent of change; and, finally, the limitations of this study and directions for further research.

Discussion of Results in Relation to Literature Review

One area of research that greatly contributed both to my development of interview questions and to my analysis was the addition of identity formation theory. Initially, I conceptualized my framework as exclusively CRT; however, the joining of those two theories and the ways in which CRT informed my thinking about the stages of identity formation aided in my analysis of participants' experiences. Accordingly, I saw a good deal of conflict and sometimes even pain as my participants recounted their experiences with identity vs. confusion (e.g., struggling to adapt their own identity to fit into the dominant cultural identity in a room, like Phil, Bob, and Daniel have done) and with trust vs. mistrust (e.g., Guy, Collin, and Phil not being able to name a single adult on campus with whom they have a trusting relationship). My preliminary commentary in my literature review was supported by my findings: Considering the basic human need for belonging and attachment, and knowing that those feelings "are bolstered by the presence of similar others" (Cross et al., 2017, p. 7), it is not surprising that Black males in my setting may struggle with identity formation as they see very few "similar others" in advanced courses and very few "similar others" on our faculty.

Another intersection of my literature review and my data collection was the commentary from students like Guy and Bob about how some advanced course teachers seem to care more about overall group performance or about content coverage than they do about individual student progress. Perhaps this is an example of their concern about mismatched cultural requirements of the White hegemonic space of school and their own Black cultural values like "cooperation, promotion of group, and survival of group" (Hunter & Davis in Allen, 2015, p. 5). Even when they themselves were excelling

academically, noticing others who looked like them who were not excelling and who were dropping out of advanced courses, seemingly without much teacher concern, bothered them.

Additionally, without knowing these specific terms, my participants provided ample evidence of both integrative fluidity and behavioral vacillation as coping strategies (Hotchkins, 2016). Integrative fluidity is on display, for example, in Bob's commentary about his social group outside of his advanced classroom and in Phil's commentary about how he would regularly choose to work with the other students of color in his advanced courses. Behavioral vacillation was on display in responses from Phil, Daniel, and Bob, who all explained how they had changed either their speech, their behavior, or both to assimilate into the dominant culture in the classroom. I could not help but hear Ladson-Billings's (1995) words echo as I analyzed this data: "Among the scholarship that has examined academically successful African- American students, a disturbing finding has emerged--the students' academic success came at the expense of their cultural and psychosocial well-being" (1995, p. 475). I wonder what lasting effects their experiences at my school will have on these students' cultural and psychosocial well-being.

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, one striking area of discrepancy between my literature review and my data collection was in the area of academic disidentification as a coping strategy. Some of David's comments hint at a sense of disidentification or disengagement (e.g., "I just fell back, wasn't really caring too much, was like a troublemaker, doing bad things" and "It ain't them not trying. I just ain't into it."). Phil, too, hinted at some degree of academic disidentification in the way that he opted out of advanced classes. These were the only two instances where I could map that concept of

academic disidentification onto my data collection; otherwise, my participants articulated a deep sense of caring about their academic performance and engagement and a deep commitment to their own self-perceptions as intelligent and academic.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of my data collection — from my own perspective — was that eight out of 10 of my participants did not cite racism as an issue at this school. Some participants acknowledged some examples of microaggressions, but many did not. Some acknowledged awkwardness and isolation in group work but hesitated to identify those instances as having been motivated by subconscious racism or bias on their peers' part. Most did not explicitly discuss the gifted identification or enrollment process in relation to race. From my stance as a critical race researcher, I cannot help but accept this finding as evidence that racism is so endemic both in our society and in our school that it goes unnoticed. It is a dangerous, invisible status quo — and one that perpetuates the myth of meritocracy advanced by those with far more privilege and power.

I was particularly struck by David's interviews and how he continually blamed himself for his lack of academic achievements in high school. He did not have a felt experience of "oppression, invisibility, and marginality" (Tatum, 2005, p. 29) at the mercy of the racist institution of schooling; he instead embodied a strong internal locus of control, holding himself responsible for a series of events that was instead almost certainly motivated by the racist judgements and cultural norms of the mostly White adults in power. While David did not express anger, it is easy to see how anyone with a strong internal locus of control like him may exhibit anger or lash out, self-destructively or otherwise, in a system that renders Black males powerless. I acknowledge that it is

also possible that David was censoring or withholding his true feelings from me; I cannot purport to know what he really felt based on two short interviews with me, a White woman who was essentially a stranger to him and who was a representative of the larger institution.

Finally, I observed some interesting intersections between my study and Flenbaugh's (2016). First, unlike Flenbaugh's, my participants did not see school as having minimal significance in their self-concept perhaps because all but one had been labeled as gifted at one point or another in their career. My data set suggests that the gifted label matters in terms of academic self-perception. Second, what I found most remarkable was that while my participants did not rank school as only marginally significant to their identities, as Flenbaugh's did on their identity maps, the inverse seemed true — a sense of segregation and isolation for gifted Black males such that they have trouble claiming a small spot in the larger identity map of our school.

A few new research avenues piqued my interest even as my data collection came to a close. First, I uncovered a theory with close ties to my own theoretical approach: collective racial esteem (CRE). CRE blends my two theoretical approaches — CRT and identity formation theory — to examine “how individuals construct their self-concepts related to the racial groups with which they affiliate” (Dugan et al., 2012, p. 176). CRE is comprised of four dimensions: private CRE (one's own thoughts about the inherent value of the racial group with which one affiliates), public CRE (one's thoughts about how others value their racial group), identity salience (“the degree of centrality of individuals' racial group memberships to their self-concepts” [Dugan et al., 2012, p. 176]), and membership affiliation (one's thoughts about “how well they function as members of

their racial groups” [Dugan et al., 2012, p. 176]). This theory presents another possible critical framework for examining students’ views of themselves and how they fit into the worlds (cultural and academic) around them.

One other area of research that caught my attention towards the end of this process emerged through discussions with a former colleague who is now in law school and who shares similar research interests. Through those discussions and through further reading, I was reminded —necessarily so —of the disadvantages of using only test scores to measure giftedness, and I was jolted by the realization that stereotype threat alone is not the only reason why this practice is particularly pernicious from a critical race perspective. In fact, intelligence and aptitude tests have their roots in eugenicist viewpoints (Hendrix, 2022). The fact that these tests perpetuate racial segregation then is not at all surprising. That they continue to be the primary (often only) method by which we measure gifted potential —the very method on which my study criteria rest— – raises further daunting questions and challenges for me and for future research.

Practice Recommendations

My findings have implications for practice and policy at several different levels at my study site. A few significant findings fall within the power of classroom teachers. First, while it is both common sense and best practice for teachers to build meaningful relationships with their students, this study validated that best practice and reinforced several reasons why. Teachers who get to know students by analyzing test scores — current and historical —are in the position to make recommendations to students, parents/guardians, and guidance counselors that may otherwise go overlooked. This practice is not necessarily only a job for teachers: I would also suggest that our guidance

counselors and/or our AP coordinator use the AP Potential Report to reach out to students and to help diversify our AP program. The AP coordinator position at my school comes with extra planning time built into the schedule; at the end of the year, that time is often used to prepare for and proctor the exams themselves. Earlier in the year, that time might be used to review the AP Potential Report from the fall administration of the PSAT and to start reaching out to students who might be a good fit but who are not currently enrolled in AP courses. This information can also be shared with our guidance counselors, who can flag specific students and provide them with some encouragement to sign up for AP classes during their annual individual meetings.

Teachers at my school should also go beyond academic knowledge to get to know students personally: their interests, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. Doing so would put them in the unique position to engage in true CRP by building a knowledge base that can help them design pedagogy, curriculum, and assessments that will best serve those individual students.

Teachers at my school should strive to build supportive and inclusive classrooms, fostering collaboration and community. They should monitor group work closely to provide guidance and support for any social situations where a student is directly or indirectly being excluded from meaningful collaboration. Teachers and administrators should also think about ways to build a stronger schoolwide community and culture within the school. Having more cross-class interactions or whole-school events could be helpful in building a stronger sense of community and in chipping away at the course-level segregation, which is de facto racial segregation. In so doing, we may be able to make strides not just toward quantitative desegregation, but also toward affective

integration (Richard, 2019). One other area for further consideration could be the development of a mentoring or advisory program, where each faculty member mentors a set number of students. The payoff could be considerable: “There is a strong positive correlation between academic success and having interpersonal connections between students and school staff” (Dodd, 2017, p. 116). While some of my participants could not even name an adult on campus that they felt they trusted, others were able to identify a wide variety of teachers or other staff members they trusted. This finding proves that anyone can build a relationship with any student if they are intentional about doing so. Any mentoring or advisory program would require careful planning and design to that end. Brown and Evans (2017) noted that “the culture of a school, although changeable, is often created over time and tends to become embedded if not entrenched” (p. 52). In my school, faculty and staff must take a proactive and culturally responsive approach to avoid becoming entrenched in our culturally *unresponsive*, disconnected status quo.

Next, there are recommendations to be considered as far as student advisement and guidance are concerned, likely at the district policy level. First, the decision to withdraw from advanced classes should not be ignored by our district from the point the decision is made onward. Initiating conversations about re-enrolling in advanced courses should not be a burden that rests solely on the student and their parent/guardian. Withdrawal from advanced courses —whether accidental or intentional —warrants close examination at frequent, pre-determined intervals.

Incorporating a question about gifted enrollment —and it should be a question, not a dismissal or mandate as Phil experienced —into the guidance process would not be difficult. Guidance counselors are required to meet with students once per year to update

their Individualized Graduation Plans (IGPs). During those IGP meetings, which frequently involve parents/guardians as well, guidance counselors help students select their courses for the following year and discuss with them their post-secondary plans. If we added a step to the IGP protocol where guidance counselors double checked current gifted eligibility as well as historical test scores, we may be able to recruit more Black males into advanced courses. Because my findings suggest that the gifted label matters, providing students with reminders when that label applies to them might contribute to their academic identification and their academic self-perception.

Furthermore, during those IGP meetings, if students are gifted-eligible and intend to attend a 4-year college, the guidance counselor should emphasize the value of advanced coursework in boosting students' weighted GPAs and in preparing students both for college admissions tests and for college coursework. My data overwhelmingly suggests that students at my school create their own motivating reasons for being in advanced coursework, that they do not fully comprehend weighted GPA, and that these courses are being advertised as “work, work, work” – which functions as gatekeeping, not as advertising.

On the district policy level, the notification process could clearly be improved. The notification letters sent home to parents/guardians are unwieldy at best (see Appendix D). Furthermore, relying only on a letter—which could be tossed aside accidentally, or which could be tossed aside after the parent/guardian reads three paragraphs that do not yet mention their individual child, or which could go to an address where the parent/guardian and student do not even reside—seems problematic. Collin's experience which included a phone call offers an interesting opportunity for improving

eligibility notification. The responsibility for that phone call would likely need to fall to individual schools, but a district policy would help ensure some consistency. A phone call, a human voice, goes a long way—and it is also two-way communication, providing parents or guardians the opportunity to ask questions and get answers immediately, unlike a letter.

Finally, on the macro policy level, it is worth noting again that test scores by themselves do not provide a complete picture of students' ability and potential — particularly given the phenomena of stereotype threat and academic disidentification, and particularly given that the tests in questions were designed to maintain racial segregation.

Implementation Plan

First, sharing my findings and initiating conversations about solutions we can control on a school level will be important. I know that my co-workers value both equity and rigor. We share common visions of proactively increasing access to and equity within our more rigorous courses; however, we do not currently have a mission, a step-by-step plan, for how to address this issue. We can only start moving towards equity if we have these conversations and then move from talking to doing. We need to acknowledge the data in front of us —the glaring racial discrepancies in enrollment —and the story that the data could tell about our school if we let it speak for us. What do we want to say instead, and how can we begin shifting our data to support our intentions? To that end, the first step of my implementation plan will be to share my results with my school's leadership team: Our administrators, our director of guidance, and our AP coordinator. My goal is to share my findings in a brief presentation at the beginning of 2023; by that time, we will have access to our PSAT scores from the fall, and we will have a brief

window to talk about some options before students start registering for classes. After sharing my findings, I will focus on a few specific suggestions.

First, I will propose working alongside the AP coordinator to use the AP Potential Report to recruit more students —hopefully more diverse students—to our AP program. In the early spring of 2023, I would like for the two of us to use that report to have individual conferences with students who may be well-suited for specific AP courses based on their PSAT scores. That report had never been accessed before I used it for my dissertation, so this is an easy area of growth for us.

Second, I would like to work with our director of guidance in the early spring of 2023 to investigate a process to change protocols for IGP conferences. I will suggest a preliminary step where guidance counselors look at historical test scores, gifted eligibility based on state criteria, and past course enrollment before they meet with each student. My own initial data collection of test scores reveals that this process might be laborious and involves combing through thousands of individual data points. As a part of this process, I would therefore consult our own campus data specialist to find out how we may be able to run a query to produce that data in a more manageable format so as not to add work for already overburdened guidance counselors.

As for advisement, I will suggest a specific and realistic focus on ways every student's high school course selection is or is not serving them well in relation to their post-secondary plans. I will consult our guidance department on how those conversations can fit into their limited time frames for IGPs and on ways we might come up with a form

for students to fill out ahead of time or during the conference to give them a more active role in the process.

My findings suggested that students may not fully grasp the significance of advanced courses for either their GPAs or their college and career readiness; making them active participants in those conversations instead of passive listeners might serve them well. Our school initiated an advisory or homeroom period last year; I will suggest to the guidance director and to administration that the advisory period be used strategically to accomplish some preliminary information-sharing and reflection.

I have already initiated some conversations with our administrative team, our director of guidance, and our AP coordinator, and I look forward to continuing those conversations as well as drawing in teachers' voices. To that end, I will also invite all faculty members to a presentation of my findings in spring of 2023. In that presentation, I will emphasize the more classroom-specific findings. I will also delineate the qualifications for gifted eligibility at the state and district levels, as well as how to locate the scores within our data management system. Both through open dialogue within that session and through an anonymous Microsoft Form afterwards, I will seek teacher feedback and input on specific and actionable ways to build schoolwide community, hoping to chip away at the sense of disconnectedness some students feel. One valuable idea that has already emerged from preliminary conversations has been a peer mentoring program for Black males enrolled in advanced courses.

Reflection on Phenomenological Action Research

I was simultaneously surprised and not surprised to find that my results do not feel particularly earth-shattering. Many of my findings link up with ideas that teachers already recognize as best practice. The fact that educators keep having the same conversations over and over reveals that the institution of school is still falling short despite educators' knowing what constitutes best practice. The only thing that came as a bit of a surprise was the degree to which students felt disconnected in advanced classrooms and in the wider school community. I knew that was an issue, but the participants' striking examples rattled me a bit, both personally and professionally.

When I reflect on the process, I remember how nervous I was as I began researching, both about recruiting enough candidates and about the degree to which they would feel comfortable talking with me because of my own positionality. While I certainly overrecruited, and while I did have a few unsuccessful attempts to recruit students, I quickly (and gratefully) realized that I had found more than enough young men who were all willing —some even excited —to speak with me about their experiences. Furthermore, I was pleasantly surprised by their candor. I think that in many cases, my participants were able to witness existing relationships I had with students whom I *do* know, which may have helped engender some trust.

Another realization I came to was that, although there was a semblance of candor, these students were obviously free to pick and choose what information they were willing to share, so I may never have a full picture of their experiences and reflections. The overuse of “ma’am” that I noticed and noted in Chapter 4 was a prickly reminder for me

that some of my participants, while willing to talk with me, still felt a power differential in those conversations that may have made them uncomfortable.

As discussed elsewhere, one part of the process that was difficult for me was the phenomenological difficulty in separating my own perceptions from my analysis of data. I found Martin's (2020) discussion of the phenomenological processes of bracketing versus bridling helpful as I worked through this process. Martin (2020) writes, "post-intentional phenomenologists believe [bracketing] is unreasonable. [They] have chosen instead to locate and describe their perceptions and what makes them, so that they may consciously interrogate how those perceptions frame data collection and analysis" (p. 73) – a process referred to as bridling. At various points in my research and within this dissertation, I have attempted to do just that. One such instance was in acknowledging the discrepancy between my perceptions and many of my participants' perceptions of racism within our school.

I still believe that a great deal of racism is so ingrained and institutionalized that it has become invisible. Because not all of my participants shared that feeling, I sometimes questioned myself for calling their attention to certain things. For example, the question about whether participants could name three Black male teachers at our school gave most of my participants great pause. Almost none could do that; then, many of them, unprompted, tried to reach back in their memories to see if they had ever had a Black male teacher. The surprise that registered on their faces as they did so made me feel not only heartbroken for them, but also guilty for having asked the question.

Limitations

One limitation of my research is simply that my sample size is small and localized. Therefore, this study likely does not have a high degree of transferability, which is common of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I have attempted to provide thick description of both my participants and my setting so that other educational researchers can assess the degree of transferability to their own settings. The findings and recommendations that emerged from my research may not be true in all settings; as Efron and Ravid (2020) noted, “for strategies to be uniformly applicable, all students must be viewed as essentially similar” (p. 3) — and as my data emphasizes, all students are not essentially similar.

Another limitation of my study remains my own positionality. Amplifying marginalized voices is a privilege, and in my dissertation design, I have taken a position of power in the way that I have selected, collected, and presented those voices. I attempted to bracket – or perhaps bridle (Martin, 2020) – my own hunches and my own feelings about my school setting in accordance with phenomenological methods, but I am sure there are places in my data analysis where my own experiences and opinions have colored the way that I have presented material. In hindsight, I wish I had taken more of a youth participatory action research approach (Herr & Anderson, 2015); I wish I had been more innovative in creating a way for my participants to be co-researchers, co-constructing this knowledge with me in a more active way.

Another limitation of this research worth acknowledging has been the Covid-19 pandemic and the way that it may have interfered with the participants’ experiences in their classrooms and with their guidance counselors. Virtual schooling impacted the ways

in which and the degree to which teachers were able to build classroom community and schools were able to build school community; furthermore, guidance counselors conducted many IGPs virtually during the pandemic. Some of the experiences recounted by participants may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which had unprecedented effects on the ways schools operated for almost two years.

Recommendations for Future Research

One further consideration that occurred to me during the research process as I studied methodology in my own coursework was the value that mixed methods may have added to my research. In particular, administering two Likert-style surveys to a larger pool of gifted Black males within my setting would have been interesting: Voelkl's (1996) "Identification with School Questionnaire" and Osborne's (1997a) "School Perceptions Questionnaire." Osborne's "School Perceptions" questionnaire in particular seems relevant. It was designed to offer "a brief identification with academics scale in identifying community college students who are at-risk for academic failure" (p. 66). Extending its application in this current study to slightly younger members of a marginalized demographic group historically "at risk" for any number of negative educational outcomes (NCES, 2019b) seems appropriate.

Using these two Likert-style surveys — either both in their entirety, or some adapted version of my own that combines the two — could have provided me with a valuable tool for initial screening for participants. Additionally, it would have given me quantitative data from a larger population that might be helpful in analyzing our school culture and how it impacts gifted Black males.

Another possible area for further research lies in the fact that Black students are under-identified for gifted education — particularly in light of the fact that this dissertation has focused only on students who have already been identified as gifted. White America offered Black America either nonexistent or subpar, separate, and unequal education for centuries; it is not particularly surprising that the yardstick used to measure Black giftedness may in fact be measuring generations' worth of inequity and subpar opportunities more than anything else. Imagining innovations in gifted identification is difficult because, like so much else in the U.S. education system, it has always been so dependent on the quantitative measure of standardized test scores. Despite the narrow measuring criteria set forth by local and/or state policies, federal law defines gifted students very broadly as those who “give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields” (Cornell Law School, n.d.). Further thought and research should explore alternative systems for determining giftedness. Perhaps it is time to conceptualize a system for measuring giftedness other than the use of tests designed for eugenicist purposes (Hendrix, 2022) on a population that was systematically denied equal educational rights for most of this country's history.

A more immediate possibility is further research into specific, actionable strategies that both teachers and schools as a whole could use to build a stronger sense of community. This was one area that participants consistently identified as lacking at my school.

Finally, with an eye towards dismantling the basic structure that underlies segregation through tracking, more research should look at de-tracking and at

heterogeneous grouping. Far more attention should be paid to schools where this has been done successfully — where students are de-tracked, where instruction is differentiated, and where gifted students still experience enrichment and rigor that helps them reach their fullest potential. Because de-tracking presents significant challenges to classroom educators, practitioner research in particular will be helpful in illustrating how best to tackle this complicated option. Despite the complications, de-tracking seems like a worthy endeavor: Perhaps it will only be through reconceptualizing gifted education in a de-tracked fashion that we can successfully dismantle a system that is so inherently flawed.

Summary

This phenomenological qualitative study investigated factors that were contributing to the disproportionately low Black male enrollment in our advanced courses. Emergent coding was used to analyze data collected during interviews and focus groups with 10 purposefully sampled gifted Black males. Findings suggested problems with the district notification protocol and with school-level marketing of advanced courses as well as shortcomings in the advisement process. Findings suggested that most participants, despite some adverse experiences and despite a diminished sense of belonging and representation in advanced courses, maintained strong senses of academic identification. Finally, findings also revealed a weak sense of community both within and outside of advanced classrooms at my school. The study reveals the need for localized, contextualized practitioner inquiry and culturally responsive teaching practices that include building meaningful relationships with individual students best serve them well.

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Appendix A:

District Notification Protocol

Identification Process

Gifted and talented students may be found within any racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic group; within any nationality; within both genders; and within populations with disabilities. Identification is a multi-step process, which consists of referral, screening, and assessment of eligibility by a district evaluation and placement team. In order to qualify for placement in gifted/talented programs, a student must meet the eligibility criteria in **TWO** out of the following three dimensions below:

- **Dimension A -- Reasoning*****
Students must score at or above the 93rd national age percentile on a nationally normed aptitude test. Students may be eligible for placement on the basis of **aptitude scores alone** if they score at or above the 96th national age percentile on the composite score of a nationally normed aptitude test.
- **Dimension B -- Achievement**
Students must score at or above the 94th national percentile on approved reading or math subtests on a nationally normed achievement test such as MAP or score at the performance standard level set at the state level on the South Carolina ELA and/or math tests. Students are NOT eligible on the basis of achievement scores alone.
- **Dimension C -- Academic Performance** is only applied if student has already met Dimension A or B.
For placement in grades 3-6, a student must achieve a performance standard set on verbal or non-verbal performance tasks which are administered in February of each year. A 3.75 grade point average in the academic disciplines may also be used starting as a rising 6th grader.

***** Automatic Eligibility for Placement:** A composite score of 96th national age percentile or higher on a nationally normed aptitude or intelligence test.

Appendix B:

Consent Letter and Form

February 20, 2022

Dear ____,

My name is Jackie Ortner. I am a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum & Instruction program at the University of South Carolina's College of Education. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree, and I would like to invite your child to participate.

I am studying the under-representation of African American males in advanced courses at our school. If your child decides to participate, he will be asked to attend two one-on-one interviews with me and one focus group session with a small group of his peers. In particular, he will be asked questions about his experiences and his comfort level in advanced courses, his sense of belonging in the school environment, and his opinions about how the school can better support gifted African American males. If any questions make him feel uncomfortable, he may choose not to answer them.

Our interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon time in my classroom, Room 356; they should last less than 30 minutes each. Our focus group will take place during one lunch session (30 minutes) in Room 356. All sessions will be audio recorded so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The recordings will only be reviewed by me, and they will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your child's identity will not be revealed.

Because the study involves focus groups, others in the group will hear what your child says, and it is possible they could tell someone else. While I cannot promise that what your child says will remain completely private, I will ask that all group members respect the privacy of everyone in the group.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child is free not to participate, or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without negative consequences. Your child's participation, non-participation, and/or withdrawal will not affect their grades or their relationship with their teachers, the high school, or the district. The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research.

I will be happy to answer any questions you or your student have about the study. You may contact me using my contact information below, and/or you can attend an optional virtual information session to ask questions on Tuesday, Mar. 8, from 5:00 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.

Thank you for your consideration. Please sign in the appropriate space on the following page, then please have your student return this form to me in Room 356.

With kind regards,

Jacquelyn Ortner

(803) 738.7300 ext 65356

jacquelyn.ortner@richlandone.org

I have read the invitation letter. I give my consent for my student to take part in the study.

Parent Signature_____ Date_____

Parent Name (printed)_____

Parent email (for link to optional virtual meeting):

I have read and understood the invitation letter. I am willing to participate in this study.

Student Signature_____ Date_____

Student Name (printed)_____

I do not wish for my student to participate.

Student Name (printed) _____

Parent Signature_____ Date_____

Parent Name (printed)_____

Appendix C:

Sample Interview Protocol

I. Standard questions for each participant, each session

- Do I have your permission to record this interview?
- I want to ensure your anonymity in this process. Your name and the names of any other teachers, students, or personnel will not be used in my research report. When appropriate, I will use pseudonyms. Do you have any questions about that?
- Have you read and signed the consent form?
- Do you have any questions about the consent form or this research?
- Are you a willing participant in this research and interview?
- Do you understand that you may stop the interview at any time?

II. Interview questions – gifted students currently enrolled in advanced courses

- When did you first realize that you were eligible for advanced courses?
- Describe a typical honors student at this school.
- Describe a typical honors teacher at this school.
- In your experience, have you found advanced classes to be diverse and/or racially balanced? Talk about what that is like.
- Have you found race/racism to be an issue in advanced courses or at this school in general? Explain.
- What is/are the motivating factors that keep you in advanced courses?
- Would you describe your experiences in advanced classes as generally negative or generally positive? Explain why.
- Tell me about a time when you felt like a valued member of an advanced class.
- Tell me about a time when you felt singled out or excluded in an advanced class.
- Can you identify and discuss some ways that teachers could help maintain more diverse enrollment in advanced classes?
- Can you identify and discuss some ways that guidance counselors could help recruit more diverse enrollment in advanced classes?
- Do you feel that your advanced-level teachers expect more, less, or the same from you, compared to other students in your class?
- Do you feel that your advanced-level teachers have any expectations, academically or behaviorally, that are different from those in other classes?
- Do you have people in the school building that you think of as mentors? Who/why? (Previous schools?)

- When was the last time you had a Black male teacher?
- With whom do you eat lunch? Is there anything else you feel I should know or someone else you think I should speak to?

III. Interview questions – gifted students NOT currently enrolled in advanced courses but were previously enrolled in at least one

- When did you first realize that you were eligible for advanced courses?
- Describe a typical honors student at this school.
- Describe a typical honors teacher at this school.
- In your experience, have you found advanced classes to be diverse and/or racially balanced? Talk about what that is like.
- Have you found race/racism to be an issue in advanced classes or at this school in general? Explain.
- Would you describe your experiences in advanced classes as generally negative or generally positive? Explain why.
- What is/are the motivating factors that previously kept you in advanced courses?
- What is/are the motivating factors that persuaded you not to maintain enrollment in advanced courses?
- Tell me about a time when you felt like a valued member of an advanced class.
- Tell me about a time when you felt singled out or excluded in an advanced class.
- Can you identify and discuss some ways that teachers could help maintain more diverse enrollment in advanced classes?
- Can you identify and discuss some ways that guidance counselors could help recruit more diverse enrollment in advanced classes?
- Do you feel that your advanced course teachers expected more, less, or the same from you, compared to other students in your class?
- Do you feel that your advanced-level teachers had any expectations, academically or behaviorally, that are different from those in other classes?
- Do you have people in the school building that you think of as mentors? Who/why? (Previous schools?)
- When was the last time you had a Black male teacher?
- With whom do you eat lunch?
- Is there anything else you feel I should know or someone else you think I should speak to?

IV. Interview questions – gifted students who have never taken advanced courses

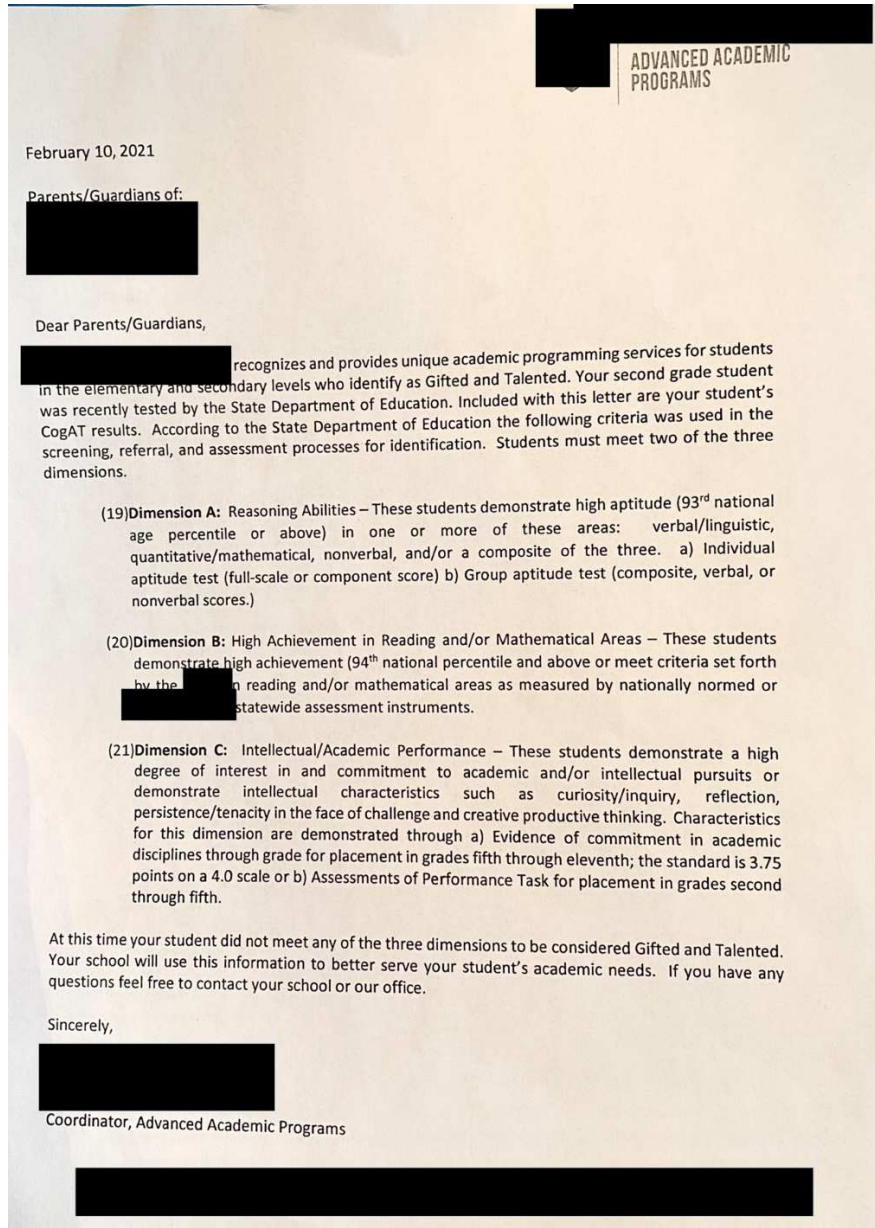
- When did you first realize that you were eligible for advanced courses?
- Describe a typical honors student at this school.
- Describe a typical honors teacher at this school.
- Have you found race/racism to be an issue at this school in general? Explain.
- Explain your decision not to enroll in gifted courses.
- What would make advanced courses a more attractive option to you?
- Do you have friends who take advanced courses? If so, describe their experiences in those courses.

- Do you have people in the school building that you think of as mentors?
Who/why? (Previous schools?)
- When was the last time you had a Black male teacher?
- With whom do you eat lunch?
- Is there anything else you feel I should know or someone else you think I should speak to?

V. Closure: Thank you for your time today. This interview will be transcribed, and I will share a copy of your responses with you to verify accuracy

Appendix D:

Sample Notification Letters



January 12, 2021

ADVANCED ACADEMIC
PROGRAMS

To the Parents/Guardians of

Dear Parents/Guardians,

All second grade students recently participated in census testing for possible placement in Academic Gifted and Talented Program. To be eligible for placement, the State Department of Education requires students to meet TWO out of the THREE dimensions listed below or score at the 96th national age percentile composite score on an individual or group aptitude test.

1. **Dimension A: Reasoning Abilities** - These students demonstrate high aptitude (93rd national age percentile or above) in one or more of these areas: verbal/linguistic, quantitative/mathematical, nonverbal, and/or a composite of the three.
2. **Dimension B: High Achievement** - Reading and/or Mathematical Areas These students demonstrate high achievement (94th national percentile and above or advanced status) in reading and/or mathematical areas as measured by nationally normed or statewide assessment instruments.
3. **Dimension C: Intellectual/Academic Performance** - These students demonstrate a high degree of interest in and commitment to academic and/or intellectual pursuits or demonstrate intellectual characteristics such as curiosity/inquiry, reflection, persistence, tenacity in the face of challenge and creative productive thinking. Characteristics for this dimension are demonstrated through the Performance Task Assessment.

Based on these criteria, your child has qualified to participate in Academic Gifted and Talented Program. will begin serving your student in gifted classes beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. If you do not wish for your child to participate in this program, please contact the office Advanced Academic Programs by July 10th. If you have any questions feel free to contact your school or our office. Best wishes for a successful 2021-2022 school year.

Sincerely,

Coordinator, Advanced Academic Programs