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Young, Gifted, Black, and Blocked: A Critical Inquiry of Barriers That Hinder Black Students' Participation in Gifted and Advanced Placement Programs

Elizabeth Anne Evans

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YOUNG, GIFTED, BLACK, AND BLOCKED: A CRITICAL INQUIRY OF
BARRIERS THAT HINDER BLACK STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN GIFTED
AND ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAMS

by

ELIZABETH A. EVANS

(Under the Direction of Daniel E. Chapman)

ABSTRACT

This inquiry explores the underrepresentation of Black students in the Gifted and Advanced Placement (AP) Program from the perspective of the student. This study focused primarily on the barriers students perceived that hindered their participation. In addition, I explored the role teachers and guidance counselors play in Black students' decisions to enroll or drop out of AP classes, and how the history and institution of gifted educations has aid and excluded Black students. Five Black high school students, four male, and one female, were interviewed.

Theoretically, my study was grounded in two distinct inquiries; Critical Theory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008) and Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1980, 2004; Delgado, 1990, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical Race Narrative was the primary means I used to contextualize and analyze the participants' narratives.

Methodologically, the study draws on the work of Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and Personal ~ Passionate ~ Participatory Inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008) both of which allows the researcher and participants to create new insights which can bring about social change. Four findings have emerged from the research. Students hold

a variety of misconceptions about Advanced Placement classes. The fear of failing and the fear of stress played a significant factor in the decision to enroll in AP classes.

Students expressed they received little to no encouragement from teachers and guidance counselors concerning AP classes. The issue of being a minority within a minority in AP classes was also a major deterrent in the decision of these participants in choosing to enroll in AP courses.

INDEX WORDS: Advanced Placement Classes, Critical Race Theory, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Gifted Education, Whiteness and White Privilege, Teacher Biases, Deficit Thinking, Racial Disidentification.

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by

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for whom all things are possible. Thank you for giving me a heart for others and the perseverance to complete this journey.

Your Grace and Mercy were always present with me.

To my loving husband, William.

Thank you for your love, encouragement, and your constant support as we underwent this journey together. For without you, I would never have considered undertaking this. Thank you for all the meals and all the events you went to without me so I could study and write. Thank you for your constant pushing and prodding and for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. Thank you for loving me.

To my children,

Sheria, Ebony, Natashia, Brittany, and Isaiah.

Thank you for traveling with me on this journey. I so appreciate the love and patience you have shown towards me when I carted all of my books and laptop to your games and summer vacations.

To my Mum,

Thank you Mummy, for never giving up on me.

Thank you for the sacrifices you made for me. Thank you for shaping me into the woman I have become.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental”. (Du Bois, 1949, p. 230)

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the declining number of African American students in the Gifted and Advanced Placement (AP) Program from the perspective of the students. The topic of underrepresentation of minority students in the gifted programs has been studied widely. What is sorely lacking in this field, however, is why minority students choose to leave the program, or choose to never enter the program at all. Too often, researchers have approached this topic from afar. Until we allow the students themselves to tell their story, we can only surmise why they elect not to participate in the gifted and talented program. “Very little research has permitted African American students to speak on their own behalf and to offer suggestions, as the true experts on their own experiences” (Thompson, 2002, xx). It was my hope that by providing these students the opportunity to share their stories, I would empower myself as well as other educators, with the knowledge we need to understand better why African American students are leaving the gifted and AP program. In addition, this research provided a compass for further study.

In order to convey the experiences of gifted Black students, I chose a qualitative research approach. Glesne (2006) stated, “Qualitative research methods are used to understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved . . . and sometimes to transform or change conditions” (p. 4). I interviewed five students who

either dropped out of the gifted program/advanced placement course work, or elected to never participate. It was my hope that this study would inform me as to why Black students drop out of the gifted program and AP courses in high school.

Numerous studies (Ford, 2010; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a, 2008b; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gay, 2000; Gibbs, 1984; Hale, 2001; Irvine, 1990; Jenks & Phillips, 1998; Kitano, 1991; Kunjufu, 2002, 2005; Moore, Ford, and Milner, 2005; Oakes, 1999; Ogbu, 2003; Stovall, 2005, 2006; & Tatum, 2003) have been conducted, which supported the alarming trend of underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and AP programs in the schools of our nation. The Department of Education (2008) reported that only three percent of the students in gifted classes were African American. As of 2006, a total of 3,236, 990 students were enrolled in gifted programs in the public schools of the nation. Of that total, only 296,150 were African American (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2010).

Research pointed to several factors that may hinder Black students from participating in gifted programs. They included teacher biases, deficit thinking, social pressures from peers and media, culturally incongruent pedagogy, and the overreliance on testing. Often, Black students internalize their teachers' low expectations of them and "question their own abilities and sabotage their own achievement" (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002, p. 56).

To further clarify my study, I also used Critical Narrative Inquiry (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008) and Personal ~Passionate ~ Participatory Inquiry (He & Phillion, 2008) as the primary methods used to obtain the perspective of my research participants. While

in the doctoral program at Georgia Southern, I was awakened to the validity of storytelling. “All of us, lead storied lives on storied landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 8) and as such, how we interpret our experiences is, in part, shaped in a narrative discourse. Our narratives are also embedded in larger systems, and so in conducting this study, I wanted to “challenge directly underlying human interests and ideologies” (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 244) that encased our stories. Critical narrative inquiry provided the overarching lens which allowed me to integrate the historical, cultural, and social issues related to my topic.

The value of critical narrative inquiry to my study was that it enabled me to view the decline of Black student participation in gifted and AP programs through a “social, political, and economic” lens (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 250). The concept was that critical narrative inquiry “must both inform and be informed by action” (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 252). It would provide a new discourse and impetus to examine the culture of the gifted program from the students’ perspective. Critical narrative inquiry would allow me to “go beyond the classroom to ask questions about the historical forces shaping societal patterns as well as the fundamental issues and dilemmas of policy, power, and dominance” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 6) in the institution of school and examine how these factors contributed to decisions of gifted Black students.

In addition to using critical narrative inquiry to gather my participants’ stories, I drew on Personal ~ Passionate ~ Participatory inquiry. He and Phillion’s inquiry incorporates a social justice lens with “focal outcomes that enact social and educational change” (He & Phillion, 2008, p. 268). Personal ~ Passionate ~ Participatory inquiry

allowed me, as the researcher, to bring my “personal, professional, and cultural experience” (p. 269) to my research in order to “connect the personal to the political” (p. 269).

The remainder of this chapter highlights the importance for conducting research into the paucity of African American students participating in gifted and AP courses. First, I provided an overview for the purpose and significance of the study to include the context of the study and the research questions. Next, I defined the concept of giftedness, its history, and the political context of gifted education. The final section of this chapter discussed how the issue of power permeated itself into public education.

Chapter II provides an overview of the relevant professional research salient to this study. My literature review includes the concept of Whiteness and White Privilege, Teacher Biases, Deficit Thinking, Racial Disidentification, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Chapter III presents my Theoretical Framework; Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory, while in Chapter IV, I discussed the Method of Inquiry I used to obtain and analyze my participants’ stories. I present the participants’ narratives and the emerging themes in chapter V, and finally in chapter VI, I answer the research questions that framed this study and provide recommendations for future research.

In keeping with the theme of Critical Narrative Inquiry and Personal ~ Passionate ~ Participatory Inquiry, I made the deliberate decision to include stories about my own children’s experiences as we navigated the sometimes perilous slope of education. I was supported in this endeavor by writers such as Janice Hale, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, Gail L. Thompson, and Beverly Tatum. I brought my voice and experiences as a

White mother of Black children, a White female middle class teacher of Black children, and as a stakeholder in my community, to my study. This study “offers a mixture of scholarship and story – of qualitative research and lived reality” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. x).

In the first chapter, I relayed how the power of politics in school was used to prevent me from viewing President Obama’s first televised address to the school children of the nation, while in Chapter II, I shared an episode my son had with his fourth grade teacher who doubted his giftedness. In chapter III, when discussing the impact racism has on the achievement and well-being of Black students, I described in detail how my son’s middle school teacher rebuffed him when he spoke to her about a racist comment a fellow classmate had made to him. I drew meaning from my personal experiences and used them to convey my awareness and growth as I moved through the research process. I wanted to see through as many eyes and from as many angles as possible.

Greene posited (1991) “Without some knowledge of connective details, it is extraordinarily difficult to overcome abstraction in dealing with other people” (p. 113). My stories and my children’s stories are the connective details that flesh out the research and give credence to the declining number of African American students participating in the gifted and AP courses.

Purpose and Significance of Study

The purpose of this study was to provide a platform in which gifted African American students could share their experiences in the Gifted and Advanced Placement Programs and what factors impact their decision to participate or drop out of the program.

The education or perhaps, the miseducation of our nations' Black children has a long and painful history. The number of African American children in gifted and talented programs across the nation shows a huge disproportionate gulf when measured against their White peers, while the number of African Americans enrolled in Special Education services is significantly higher than White students (Ford, 1998). In a study of the impact tracking has on students, Oakes (1999) concluded, "African-American and Latino students were much less likely than White or Asian students with the same test scores to be placed in accelerated courses" (p. 231).

It is not enough to study the achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts. In his quest to bring educational equality and opportunities for the newly freed slaves, W.E.B. DuBois developed the Talented Tenth philosophy. He advocated educating the top 10% of the Black race to hold positions of leadership. How can this dream be fulfilled when our most academically talented African American students are waiving their opportunity to participate in a program that is designed to enhance their education? Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) stated, "To date, few studies have focused on factors that affect the retention of students of color in gifted programs" (p. 51).

The significance of this study, in addition to providing a forum for gifted African American students to share their insights and experiences in the gifted program, is to examine the gifted program itself. Is it appropriate to segregate students by ability? What if any, is the social capital associated with the program? Does the social and cultural capital gained balance the alienation many Black students experience when they are

involved in gifted programs? How does the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted programs mirror the marginalization of Blacks in other areas in our nation? Why do a high percentage of African-American students choose not to participate in the gifted and Advanced Placement programs? How do gifted African-American students perceive being gifted? How has the history and institution of gifted education aided and excluded Black students, and finally, what role do educators have in the decision of African-American students who drop out or elect not to participate in gifted, Advance Placement, or Honors classes?

Context of the Study

We had just arrived home from our daughters' Natashia and Brittany's orientation for the upcoming high school year. Brittany would be a sophomore while Natashia would be a junior. The orientation was filled with the usual running around to find the classrooms, meet the teachers, locate lockers, and pick up schedules. Both of the girls were in the college prep program and were doing very well

Later that evening after the dinner dishes had been washed, first day outfits were selected, and book bags packed and stowed by the door, my husband and I retreated to our usual spots in front of the T.V. to watch the 11 o'clock news. We were both exhausted and actually the T.V. was watching us. We must have nodded off and awoke simultaneously as we were both startled to see Natashia standing beside us. She stood there, beside my glider rocking chair, clutching a paper in her hand and she appeared to be very distressed. Thrusting the paper forward (her new class schedule,) she said,

“Mama, I want to change my schedule; you’ll need to go with me tomorrow to sign off on it.” “Why, what’s wrong with it,” my husband asked, “Do you have the wrong classes?”

As Natasha recited a litany of reasons why she should change her schedule, we realized the classes she wanted to switch were her honors, advanced placement, and gifted classes. Why did my bubbly, extroverted, and bright child want to drop out of her gifted classes? Thus, this concern began a long dialogue between the three of us, one that still resonates within me even to this day. After much prodding and some tears, Natasha finally blurted out, “Mama, I’m the only Black kid in my class, please don’t make me go.” This plea from my middle daughter stopped me dead in my tracks. I was appalled and devastated. My mind raced back to the day she was accepted into the gifted program. She had been tested every year for the gifted program since kindergarten and inevitably always came up short a few points. Finally, in the fourth grade she made the cut! Our whole family was ecstatic! We all knew she was smart, and to have her accepted into the gifted program finally validated what we all knew.

As an educator, I was aware of the advantages the gifted program could afford students. In my own school, I had witnessed the gifted students trekking off to the State Capital to meet the Governor, traveling out of state to a zoo to study animals and their habitats, as well as engaging in other countless encounters with various speakers. I wanted those same experiences for my own daughter. As Natasha progressed through elementary and middle school, I watched in exhilaration as her experiences in the gifted program enhanced and magnified her talents and personality. In her sophomore year she

had traveled to Washington, DC, as an ambassador for the Governor's Apprenticeship Program, an offer which came to her as a direct result of being in the gifted program.

However, as much as she grew intellectually, as much as the opportunities allowed her to explore new territory, as much as she blossomed and bloomed academically, she had also begun to experience an inward dive socially and emotionally, one that, although I could empathize, advice, and console, I could not live for her. Natashia's questioning of her identity did not come as a thunderbolt, nor as some huge epiphany, but rather in small increments, similar to a small cut, that unattended to properly, can fester and become infected. Of my three daughters, Natashia has had an easier time weaving herself between both of her cultures. As a bi-racial teen-ager, in a rural community, she could get along with any group of people. She could just as easily sit at the lunch table with the Black kids as she did with the White kids. In fact, she told me once, that she jumped around the lunch-room sitting in 'different zones' just to avoid being labeled. Although Natashia was at ease in both the Black and White culture in her school, there were times when she longed to belong, to fit in, without having to try. By the end of her sophomore year, Natashia had been a varsity cheerleader, was a soloist trumpet player in the marching band, had had a leading role in the one act play, and served on the homecoming court.

She was from all outwardly appearances, very popular, and I thought, secure in who she was. But as she poured out her heart to her father and me that night, I realized I had taken a lot for granted. I did not fully understand the daily insults she was the recipient of from her Black classmates. She was often harassed for being smart, talking

like a White girl, and accused of thinking she was better than others. She felt there was a perception among some peers that because her mother was White, she thought she was better than her classmates. Her inner self began to crumble and she began to doubt herself, her identity and her place in school.

Much research has been conducted concerning the lack of minorities, in particular, African Americans, in the gifted, honors, and advanced placement programs across the nation as well as the achievement gap between Black and White students (Barton, 2003, Jencks & Phillips, 1998, Peske & Haycock, 2006). However there has been very little research concerning why many African-American students choose to leave the gifted program or having been identified as gifted, never enter the program (Ford & Whiting, 2008). Ford (1996) asserted, "Charges of acting White seems to be effective at hindering too many Black students from taking full advantage of certain academic opportunities available to them, including opportunities to participate in gifted education." Black students who choose to be successful in school walk a fine line with their peers and risk social isolation.

My youngest child, Isaiah, who is now nearly 16 years old, is also in the gifted program. As his mother, I want the best for him. As an educator, I seek out all the resources I can in order to ensure his success. But how do I combat the negative perceptions that he and other Black students may face when they choose to be successful in school? What tools can I provide them to keep the dissenters at bay? How can I enable Black students to be successful in academics without feeling fearful of losing their cultural identity?

After entering into the Curriculum Studies program at Georgia Southern University, I had the opportunity to be introduced to a diverse group of people who validated my concerns about the education that impoverished students, as well as the education students of color, receive in our public schools. Writers (Gay, 2000; Hale, 2004; Howard, 2006; Landsman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paley, 2000; Tatum, 2003) have unlocked a new lens in which my awareness of the disenfranchised and marginalized other has been heightened and may be examined more intensely. Their writings concerning how we teach children, in particular, children of color and children of working class parents has become a rallying cry for teachers to become more culturally responsive to their students.

Research Questions

The general question for this research study was: What reason do Black students give for choosing not participate in the gifted and Advanced Placement program?

Specific questions were:

- How has the history and institution of gifted education aided and excluded Black students?
- What role do educators have in Black students' decision to drop out or elect not to participate in gifted, AP, and Honors classes?

Autobiographical Roots

My dissertation's research derives from my personal experiences - as a child growing up during the Boston integration of its public school system and as a White woman married to a Black man and mother of bi-racial children. I am 56 years old,

white, female, and married to a Black man. I'd say I'm middle class right now. By all outward appearances, I would seem to just blend in and not really have any complaints about the climate of our country and world, and that's my point. How often do we look at one another and only see the superficial? I recall sitting in my undergraduate introduction to education course in 1989 when the professor reminded us that we had an extra day to complete an assignment because there would be no class due to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. The student sitting next to me, a White lady of at least my age (I was 29) said, "Well, at least he was good for something". I was stunned! But I realized that she felt "safe" with me because I was also White and therefore must feel the same way! I am ashamed to admit that I said nothing in response to her comment. I just sat there and fumed. Later, when I got home, I replayed the incident over and over in my head, rehearsing what I would say to her the next time she made a similar comment.

In his book, *White Like Me*, Wise (2008) describes my lack of response as "White bonding" (p. 103). White bonding occurs when discussions of race come up in a group of White people who are not really good friends, but rather just the briefest of acquaintances. Because there is no shared familiarity among the group other than being White, when someone in the group makes an off color remark or a racist comment, the rest of the people in the group, rather than confront the offending person, just seem to wilt away and show indifference. This is exactly what I did. I was unwilling to confront her racism, for whatever reason; fearfulness, timidity, unpreparedness. Wise explains that many White people when confronted with situations of racism find themselves "Paralyzed either by uncertainty, fear, or both... a fear of alienating family, friends, or colleagues who may not understand why we feel as we do - the fear, as James Baldwin

explained, of being turned away from the welcome table of white society” (Wise, 2008, p. 90). I allowed myself to be consumed by the fear that day. Remaining silent that day was just as horrendous if I had uttered the words myself. I think of her often and wonder how her attitude influences her teaching and her relationship with students of color.

I have always been interested in championing the causes of the oppressed ever since I was a small child. I have several memories from childhood that I believe had a profound effect on how I interpret my relationships within the world around me and most likely contributed to the choices I have made in life. The earliest memory I have is when I was about five or six years old. I attended a Catholic school in South Boston. I remember the nuns showing us pictures of children in Africa suffering from starvation. Their tummies were bloated and there were flies sticking to the children’s lips. I remember praying for them and then taking a small metal container home to fill with change. We students would bring the containers back to the nuns, full of change. This change would then be sent over to the kids in Africa to buy food and medical supplies. I felt important; I was being helpful, making a difference. And it felt good.

I am one of six children, the oldest of both my mother and father who were divorced when I was about three years old. (Both of my parents have remarried, my mother had two more children and my father had three) My mother was a British citizen when she met my father who was stationed at an Air Force base near her hometown, a small village just outside London. She was nineteen and working as a clerk at a bank. My father had come in to exchange American currency into British pounds. They soon became a couple and within one year they were married.

After they married, they moved closer to my father's Air Force base. Mummy was somewhat stranded in this new town as my father took the only car to work every day. Yet she did make friends with the neighbors who had a daughter the same age as herself. She and Molly became lifelong friends even after Mummy moved to America. While I was an infant, my father had several extra marital affairs, which caused their marriage to deteriorate. Soon after, my father received orders to return to the states. Unbeknownst to Mummy, he had put the house up for sale. Shortly after, a moving van arrived at the house and all their household furniture and trappings were packed up. My mother's personal belongings and my baby items were packed in a separate trunk with the promise from my father that it would be shipped to my Mum in the United States. Needless to say, the trunk with our belongings never arrived.

Mummy, in the meantime, had been exchanging photos and letters with my father's mother since they were engaged. My mother continued to have a close relationship with my grandmother throughout my life. My grandmother was a very loving person. She offered us a place to live, a permanent home. I was nearly three when my mom and I left England to fly to Milwaukee. We stayed about six months and then flew out to Massachusetts where my father was stationed. They tried to reconcile but ended up getting divorced. When his tour of duty was up, he left and I did not see him again until I was seven. I had no contact with him again until I was eighteen.

My relationship with my father is neither cold nor hot; it is still evolving. At the age of fifty-six, I still find myself yearning for his love and his attention. Several years ago, in an effort to connect with him, Isaiah and I flew up to St. Paul to visit him. Since

my grandma died, he now lives in her home, the home that she grew up in. As I walked around the house and revisited with the different childhood memories, I took careful note of the portraits and photos that decorated the walls, pausing in front of those of my grandmother, my aunts and uncles and my brothers and sister. As I lingered over them, I traveled back in time. I was seventeen again, looking for any resemblance between myself and this other family of mine. Later that night, as I tucked Isaiah in bed and bent over to kiss him goodnight, he whispered to me with uncompromising honesty, “Mama, there’s no pictures of us anywhere.” In his childlike innocence, Isaiah pointed out what I knew to be true all along. I was an interloper, a visitor. Not family. I had made the same observation myself as I reacquainted myself with Grandma’s home, pouring over her knick - knacks and reminiscing over my past visits with her. Nowhere in the house, on any of the three floors, was there a picture of me.

I have made a concerted effort to stay in contact with him, visiting him and exchanging emails. But I always feel as though I am the initiator and it feels contrived and strained. Each time I speak with him or return from a visit with him, I have mixed emotions. I’m euphoric because we connected and yet I’m disillusioned because it takes so much work. As an adult, I have had a complicated relationship with my father. His absence in my life has caused me much self - doubt and yet strengthened me in ways that have influenced my own opinion about marriage and family. Growing up as a neither here nor there child of two families, I was determined to not let my own children feel betwixt and between. I vowed that my marriage would not be a broken one, and all my children would have the same daddy. Having experienced a sense of incompleteness

growing up, I knew firsthand how damaging it is to oneself. I have been blessed to having been married for thirty-seven years to my husband, William.

When I was young, Mummy and I moved around a lot. Each place was nicer than the last. The first place I can remember was a tall apartment building in Brookline. The next place I remember was the Donovan's Place in the upper end of Broadway Street in South Boston. Mr. and Mrs. Donovan rented out the lower portion of their home. Our apartment consisted of one large room, with the kitchen at one end and the bed area somewhere in the middle. Mummy and I shared the one bed. The bathroom was across the hall from our apartment. I remember us peeking out our door and looking both ways before we would scoot across the hallway to take our baths. Mummy kept the place very neat and tidy. We lived there until I was about five.

The last place just the two of lived together before she got remarried, was 502 East 7th street in South Boston. We had three rooms this time and we lived on the first floor. I had my own bedroom and Mummy slept in the living room. During the day, her bed looked like a couch. She had taken a single bed and removed the head and foot boards. She bought long circular pillows and propped them up against the wall and it looked like a couch. She converted an old door into a coffee table by removing the door knob and propping it up on some bricks. She always had a flair for putting things together. The apartment was very cozy. At night, she would toss the pillows on the floor and she had a bed.

Because my mother was single parent, I spent much time in the care of others. One of my earliest babysitters was Emantha. She was a big and loving woman from

Puerto Rico. She had three kids, two teenage boys, and a little girl, Maria, about the same age as me. The arrangement was that all four of us would come home from school together and my mother would come and pick me up after school. It was pretty late when she got to Emantha's place because she had to take a bus from work and then walk a bit, so most nights I would eat dinner with the family. Maria and I got along very well. She had long dark hair, and olive skin. I loved being at their home. We would play in her room for hours. Emantha's home was always in disarray. Clothes and toys were strewn everywhere and the television was always blaring and the boys' hi-fi could be heard from upstairs. Each day as we entered the house after school we were greeted with the most wonderful smells emanating from the kitchen.

I was very happy hanging out with Maria and being at Emantha's house. They all treated me like I was just another member of the family. Mummy would bring little treats for Maria and I on Fridays. One treat in particular stands out in my memory. Mummy came in the house with two dolls, one doll was Black and the other doll was White. I'm not sure if Mummy bought the two dolls of different colors on purpose, the dark doll for Maria and the light doll for me, but in any case, Maria immediately reached for the White doll while I grabbed the Black doll. The White doll had blue eyes and long straight blonde hair. The Black doll had brown eyes and soft curly black hair. Her skin color was like a dark toffee. I thought my doll was the most beautiful doll I had ever seen. I had never seen a doll of color before and I was mesmerized. She was so unlike me, I had to have her!

Childhood Interrupted

When I was eight years old I was an avid fan of the television show *Julia* which starred Diahann Carroll, and purchased the Mattel version of her. When the show would come on, I would sit in front of the television with my *Julia* doll in my lap. Later, I would incorporate the shows into my own imaginary play. I remember one time when I visited my friend, Joanne for the night. We had talked about it all week and made elaborate plans. The arrangement was Mummy would bring me over to her house after dinner on Friday night. She lived just around the block, so it was an easy walk. Mummy helped me carry my little overnight bag and I carried my Barbie doll case. We arranged all the dolls against Joanne's bed and we sat on the floor and played contently, two little girls immersed in fantasy. As we were playing, Joanne's older brother, Donald, came into the room to tell us there were snacks for us in the kitchen. I recall sitting on the floor and looking up at him as he stood in the doorway of Joanne's bedroom. He was leaning against the doorframe, and had one arm propped against the wall, and he had a scowl on his face.

"Whose nigger doll is that?" he barked out at us. I was immediately frozen with fear. Although I was familiar with the term, at the age of eight I was not prepared to do battle with this teenager.

"She's not a nigger, she's a nurse, and she has her own T.V. show!" I retorted.

"She's still a nigger", he said, and sauntered off, confident and self - assured in his own bigotry. I remember feeling deflated, but not articulate enough to verbalize my emotions.

Traveling across town each night after work to pick me up at Emantha's house became very tiring for my mother, so she went about looking for another babysitter, one who perhaps might be closer to our apartment. The Mother Superior of the school I was attending suggested a family who might be interested in taking me in. My mother went to her house to meet her and they hit it off splendidly. They were both English and had lots in common. Margaret and her husband Charles O'Reilly had eleven kids and they attended the same school as me. One child was away at college and the two youngest, twins, were still at home. The arrangement was that the oldest girl, Jane would pick me up on the way to school and my mom would come to their house and pick me up after work.

While living in South Boston, I attended a Catholic school, which was located right across the street from a public elementary school. The back portion of the school where we had recess was fenced in. I remember standing at the fence of my school watching the kids across the street running, laughing and squealing. They seemed different from me somehow and I wanted to be amidst them. I know now that they were Italian, Jewish, and of many other divergent backgrounds. The chain link fence not only served as a physical barrier but also as a schism among cultures. Those memories have always stayed with me.

It was while I was under the care of the O'Reilly's that I became aware of racial prejudice in two forms. Each Thursday, school did not begin until after noon in order to give the Nuns time for their weekly penance and special mass. On these days, my mom and I would trek down to the O'Reilly's house and she would drop me off. One

particular Thursday, the T.V. was playing the Merv Griffin Show. I happened to be in the kitchen coloring when a woman began singing. I think it was Della Reese or Roberta Flack. I was mesmerized by her. I sat there, mouth open, my crayon suspended in the air, and my shoulders twitching. She was so COOL! Just as my feet began to tap on the floor, one of the older boys, walked in the kitchen.

“What are you watching that colored girl for? Turn that off!” He promptly turned the T.V. off. I jumped up, ready to protest, but quickly took my seat when he turned on me with a scowl on his face.

“We don’t watch stuff like that in this house.” He pointed to the television with his thumb for emphasis. I recall sitting there, feeling disappointed, aware that he had made a slight to the singer solely because of her skin color. I felt powerless. I said nothing. I made no protest of any kind. I knew my place.

The next revelation came soon after. The oldest daughter was planning her wedding and Uncle Charles had vowed not to attend because the man she was marrying was an Italian! Uncle Charles didn’t speak to her for years and when she came to visit it was always when her Dad was at work. As an adult I now find this very odd. The Irish were so oppressed in the early twentieth century, how could he, knowing the history his parents had endured when arriving into the United States, inflict that same kind of oppression and rage onto others? But then I recall Palo Freire’s words, the oppressed, once free, then often turn around and oppress.

I grew up in South Boston during the integration of the Boston School System. I witnessed the people in my neighborhood, parents of my friends, and local community

government officials demonstrate and march in their defiance to integrate our schools. I remember the Nun vainly trying to get us back to our seats as we watched the demonstrators march around our school shouting to keep the schools segregated. I watched as they carried signs and shout that they would never let it happen. I can still see their raised fists and faces distorted with anger. “The fight for school desegregation in Boston schools was among the most vicious in civil rights annals” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 21). We watched as the crowd, led by Boston’s mayor at the time, Louise Day Hicks, stopped in front of the church to kneel down and pray, calling on God I suppose, to retain their segregated school system.

As the nun ushered us back to our desks away from the windows, I could sense her fear, yet I don’t remember her comforting us or saying anything about it for that matter. Later, watching the news I watched as the busses arrived at South Boston High School from Roxbury and Dorchester with the Black students. I witnessed the crowds as they threw bottles and rocks at the windows and at the kids when they were getting off the busses. The racial slurs still echo in my head. Even though I was a kid, I was appalled and knew it was wrong.

In her book, *Killers of the Dream*, Lillian Smith (1961) describes how the children in the South knew their parents were teaching them two different ways of living. “Something was wrong with a world that tells you that love is good and people are important and then forces you to deny love and to humiliate people” (Smith, 1961, p. 39). I wanted to jump into the television and shield the students, to take their place. “I suddenly wanted to stop being nice and gentle and quiet and firm but instead I wanted to

rage at them, to shout aloud like the old Judaic prophets warning them that even God would not put up with this kind of thing much longer” (Smith, 1993, p.289-290). I was uneasy as I watched the events unfold around me, yet I was powerless to intervene. It was around this time that my parents began to look outside the city of Boston for a home in the suburbs.

Although I was only in grade school, I knew intuitively that there was a disconnect between what I was learning in my classroom from the nuns and the Priests. Why were we encouraged to collect money for the children in Africa but not associate with Black people here? Weren't we supposed to love everyone? Aren't we all God's children? I could not connect the teachings I received in school about caring for the children in Africa with what I was witnessing in my neighborhood. I did not wrestle with these feelings for long consciously. But as I progressed through my adolescence and young adulthood, these experiences left an indelible mark upon me.

Growing up, class differences were not really emphasized in any overt way. I was not cognizant of the struggle my mother endured in order to support us. I remember moving frequently when she got a new and better job or got a raise. For me, it was an adventure to go somewhere new. Mummy had a flair for decorating and could transform the dreariest apartment into a palace. I knew without being told we weren't rich, but we weren't poor either. I do remember Mummy on many occasions giving me the rest of her dinner when I complained I was still hungry. Since I went to a Catholic school, we were required to wear a school uniform and most of my play clothes and special occasion clothes were handmade by Mummy. I was much more aware of race differences. I

remember as a six or seven year old child being on the beach in South Boston one day during the summer. Across the water were tall red brick buildings, which appeared to me to be miles and miles away. I asked my babysitter who lived over there. She told me that was where the colored folks lived. For the longest time I thought she was referring to Africa, the place where the children lived who I collected money for. It wasn't until a few years later when going to the Sears and Roebuck store, that I realized that the tall red buildings were just a few miles away, I could get there in a matter of minutes in a car, and it was also called the Projects, a place in town that Black people were more or less regulated to live in.

In her book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, bell hooks, (2000) explains that for her class was the more salient than race. Her mother was always seeking to be higher up in the pecking order; clothes had to be starched and pressed, double negatives were discouraged, and her household was neat and orderly (hooks, 2000). Her desire as a child to have the material goods other children had, caused her much pain and anguish and served as a source of hostility between her and her mother. She was always aware of what they lacked.

Like hooks when she was a child, I too was insulated from any real direct interaction with other cultures. For the most part, my friends, my mother's friends and the places we lived and shopped were White. My mother and I would occasionally go into downtown Boston and visit Chinatown and the North End, both of which I was captivated with. The sights, smells, and the foods invigorated my senses and created in me a desire to step outside my own familiar surroundings. But I never interacted with

these cultures, just observed them from afar. My mother never said I couldn't be friends with people of color, we just didn't know any. So when I did come in contact with people of color, I would stare and my mother, embarrassed, would pull on my arm and hiss in my ear, "Don't stare, it's not polite". As though if I didn't look at them, they wouldn't exist.

I was around nine years old when my mother married my stepfather, Richard. We moved out of South Boston into the suburb of Quincy. I joined the Girl Scouts and became immersed in community projects through school and church. I was also a Candy Stripper (hospital volunteer) while in Jr. and Sr. high school. I learned that I could make a difference and have an impact on others and I liked doing it. My dream career was to join the Peace Corps and go to Africa but I was told I had to have a college education. I joined the Army after graduation from high school with that in mind, however, I met and married my husband and my career path took a detour.

For many years, when I would allow myself to meditate on my childhood experiences, I would become depressed or angry. I would push the memories aside, in hopes that if I could forget them, then perhaps I could convince myself they didn't happen. I dreaded going to therapy, but knew instinctively that the wounds needed airing in order for true healing to take place. As I picked apart each layer of hurt I was searching to be free. However, I realize now, that I will always carry home with me. In her book, *Letter to My Daughter*, Maya Angelou (2009) encapsulates the bittersweet feelings home can conjure within us. "I believe that one can never leave home. I believe that one carries the shadows, the dreams, the fears and dragons of home under one's skin,

at the extreme corners of one's eyes and possibly in the gristle of the earlobe" (Angelou, 2009, p. 6). Rather than deny my lived experiences, I choose instead to embrace them, to use them to strengthen me to be a better person.

I am a mom with four biracial children ranging in ages from sixteen to thirty-five. I have been an elementary school teacher for 22 years. Although I have not explicitly experienced racial discrimination, I have vicariously experienced it through my children. Once when I was in counseling many years ago, my therapist asked me if I thought by marrying a Black man, did I somehow think I could atone for the mistreatment Blacks receive. I can never really get away from that question. It lingers in the back of my mind always. Do I call more often on Black kids in class than White kids because I think they won't get a fair shake elsewhere? Do my experiences as a child, and as a mother of biracial children cause me to see Black kids through a different lens from most White teachers? Why do I make a conscious effort to sit students of color with one another? Why do I make such a big deal about incorporating the accomplishments of minorities in my teaching? Why is having a Black History program so important to me and yet the Black teachers in my school will not help much? Teachers and administrators seek out my counsel when dealing with minority children and their parents. These are biases and challenges I grapple with as I interact with my students.

My compassion for the marginalized and oppressed has had a profound impact on my perspective and often causes me to examine social injustices that permeate our society. I am very empathetic and I worry that my personal feelings about racial intolerance will cause me not to be objective. How do I guard against that? I am

encouraged by Patricia Hill Collins, “. . . The best way of understanding another person’s ideas was to develop empathy and share the experiences that led the person to form these ideas” (Kessler, 2004, pgs. 291-300). I do not believe that the personal experiences a researcher brings to the subject matter should be discounted, but rather can provide substance and a relevant perspective.

In her book, *Releasing the Imagination*, Maxine Greene explains that using our imagination allows us to piece together a coherent world. This in turn creates empathy in us, which “enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called ‘other’ over the years’ (Greene, 1995, p. 3). Perhaps I have been using this same imagination to make sense of my own experiences as a child. These experiences have shaped me as a mother, teacher, and human being. They have created in me the capacity to empathize and reach across to others.

Defining Giftedness

Each culture has its own measurement of what it means to be gifted, and the importance of giftedness is contingent upon the cultural values of its people. Academic strengths have not always been viewed as enviable and sought after. In early Sparta, boys began receiving military training as young as age seven. In Greece, the upper-class males were educated in the classics. Roman culture provided an elementary education for boys and girls, but beyond that, only boys were allowed to continue in pursuing an education. In the Eastern hemisphere, China prized its gifted youth. Following Confucian philosophy, Chinese people believed that all children should be educated, but educated only in accordance with their ability. China could be considered the very first model of

gifted education. Children were considered gifted not just in terms of their academic prowess, but also for their leadership, creativity, originality, perception, and reasoning abilities (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

In the United States, however, defining and recognizing children who are gifted has occurred largely through government panels and legislation. In 1972, the United States Office of Education published the first formal definition of giftedness.

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and /or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. (Marland, 1972, p. 10)

Purdy (1999) argued, “How to educate the so-called ‘exceptional’ student is a moral as well as an educational question” (p. 314). She argued that children who have academic weaknesses are not denied special services because it would be immoral not to do so. She asserted, however, that the gifted student is also entitled to special services because not to do so would be unethical and immoral. Special education services for the academically challenged student are “defended on the grounds that it reduces inequality” (p. 314). Purdy added that the “principle that morally relevant differences can justify different treatment supports the moral call to provide special education services for our most talented and gifted students” (p. 314).

Prior to the 1920s, there were intermittent attempts to recognize different abilities among children. In the 1870s in St. Louis, a program was designed, which would enable students of high ability to accelerate through the elementary grades. Massachusetts and New Jersey followed suit and created a system in which gifted students could move quickly through the required curriculum in a shorter time frame. In 1901, the first school in the nation for gifted children was founded in Worcester, Massachusetts. However, with the onslaught of World War I and the Great Depression, gifted education services took a back seat (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p. 4).

History of Gifted Education

Inherent Differences

Francis Galton (1869), cousin of Charles Darwin, alleged in his book, *Hereditary Genius*, that intelligence was related to a person's senses and that exceptional families reproduced exceptional children. He concluded, "Intelligence is due to natural selection and heredity - that distinguished persons seemed to come from succeeding generations of distinguished families" (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p. 5). So enamored with his findings, Galton, in 1883, created the term *eugenics*, and "advocated the regulation of marriage and family size according to the hereditary endowment of parents" (Gould, 1996, p. 107). It should be noted that Galton, when conducting his experiments, did not take into consideration that children of wealthy and privileged families also inherit a plethora of other gifts such as environment and opportunities that enable them to be distinguished in the first place (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

Alfred Binet – The Originator of the Intelligence Test

Alfred Binet was commissioned by the French government in the late 1890s to identify low ability students. The premise being that low achieving students should and would benefit from special training designed to accommodate their needs. Binet, in examining the results of several subtests; attention span, memory, judgment, and reasoning, noted that his results supported the teacher's observations of children who were having academic difficulties. His most significant achievement during this trial was the concept of mental age. Mental age refers to the intelligence level of children and how this intellectual age measures against their physical age. Binet concluded that at any given age level, a child may be on level, behind, or ahead of their physical age (Hearne & Maurer, 2000).

Binet's sole purpose in establishing a child's mental age was to help teachers shape and deliver curriculum to less-able students in a manner that would best meet their needs. In addressing the educational needs for students who lag significantly behind their chronological age, Binet insisted that teachers develop lessons that center on the child's character and aptitudes. Binet arduously cautioned against using the intelligence score as a means of elevating and segregating children. It should also be noted that Binet only tested students who their teachers identified as lagging behind academically. He did not test students whom teachers believed were on level or above level (Hearne & Maurer, 2000).

Binet believed that intelligence was too "complex to capture with a single number" (Gould, 1996, p. 181). In addressing the propensity of educators to misuse the

results of his test, Binet warned, “The scale, properly speaking, does not permit the measure of intelligence, because intellectual qualities are not supposable, and therefore cannot be measured as linear surfaces are measured” (Binet, 1905, p. 40). Binet did not endorse the theory that intelligence was a biological and fixed entity. He vehemently spoke out against using his test as a means of labeling children as superior and spoke out passionately concerning educators who misused his test.

Unfortunately, Binet’s misgivings that his intelligence testing would one day be misused have come to fruition. The test, because it is grounded in scientific research, has become the ‘holy grail’ in determining the ability of student’s achievement and how they can be best educated. Furthermore, results of intelligence testing have been used “as a justification to propose, project, and enact racist social policies” (Dennis, 1995, p. 243).

Lewis Terman – Mass Marketer of Inherent Intelligence

The original mental abilities test created by Binet has undergone several changes since its inception. In 1916, American psychologist Lewis Terman of Stanford University, reinterpreted Binet’s test and Americanized the name. Now known as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Terman and his colleagues tested a total of 1,528 children, who they determined to be gifted, using their newly revised version. Nearly all of the students tested with an IQ of 135 or higher (Davis & Rimm, 2004, Gould, 1996). It should be noted that although Terman conducted this seminal research and followed these children over a period of 20 years, and is considered one of the most thorough and longitudinal studies of its kind, it was, however, conducted under what can only be termed by standards as biased.

Regarding his subject sample, in comparison with the population of the California urban centers at the time, there were twice as many children of Jewish descent that would be expected, but fewer children of African American or Hispanic parents. Chinese American students were not sampled at all because they attended special Asian schools at the time. (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p. 6)

Just as Francis Galton's subjects in his study were children of the wealthy, participants in Terman's study group were also from the privileged sector of the largest cities in California. Most of the students' parents were highly educated and held prestigious jobs. The environments these students lived in provided them with exceptional opportunities and resources that would enable them to procure the maximum development, intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Incongruence between students who have access to resources and students who do not have access to resources continue to plague the validity of the testing process for the gifted. In revising Binet's test, Terman was not only concerned with identifying low and high ability children to meet their educational needs but also for a much more insidious reason; to promote the "maintenance of social ranks and distinctions" (Gould, 1996, p. 185).

It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring tens of thousands of these high-grade defectives under the surveillance and protection of society. This will ultimately result in curtailing the reproduction of feeble-mindedness and in the elimination of an enormous amount of crime, pauperism, and industrial inefficiency. (Terman, 1916, pp. 6-7)

It appears that Terman believed in the concept of eugenics set forth by Galton. Lagemann (2000) asserted that through intelligence testing, Terman sought to provide an

in-depth understanding in matters of race, the behavior of intelligence over a given period and mental stability. Terman's views regarding the intelligence of various races have been helpful in perpetuating the stock story that certain groups because of their ethnic or socioeconomic status should be regulated to certain positions in society. Terman then moved on to include in his inherent abilities theory from children to racial and ethnic groups. Of Blacks, Mexican, and Spanish-Indian people, he made the following observation:

They represent the level of intelligence which is very, very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the southwest and also among Negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they came. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexican, and Negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods. When this is done there will be discovered enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture. ...there is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding. (Terman, 1916, pp. 91-92)

In his biography, *Trails to Psychology*, Terman (1932) made the following observation, further solidifying his conviction of the hereditarianism viewpoint on intelligence: "The major difference between children of high and low IQ and the major

differences in the intelligence scores of certain races, as Negroes and whites, will never be fully accounted for on the environmental hypothesis” (p. 240). Binet, when commissioned by the French government to determine how to identify low achieving students who would benefit from special educational instruction, viewed his test and its results exclusively as a diagnostic tool (Gould, 1996).

Terman (1923) stated, however, with his revision, he wanted to test all students in order to sort and classify them. He stated, “It would be a mistake to test only those pupils who are recognized as obviously below or above average” (p. 22). Terman quickly set about mass marketing his intelligence test to public schools systems and in doing so, created a market in which schools across the nation quickly latched on to, perpetuating the premise that children should and ought to be ranked by their intelligence.

The Russians Made Us Do It: The Launching of Sputnik

As America recuperated from two world wars and a depression, monies and attention for gifted children was not a priority. As a result, gifted children languished in the public schools until the Russians launched their satellite, Sputnik, into orbit in 1957. Legislators and educators raced to identify the most gifted students and developed programs that would enable American students to catch up to the Soviets (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Ford & Harris, 1999; Hearne & Maurer, 2000; Jolly, 2009a; Wickstrom, 2004).

As is often the case with gifted students’ needs, “They become a national priority when excellence is sought and a critical need is perceived” (Jolly, 2009a, p. 38). “With the Soviets’ launching of Sputnik, a deliberate and concerted effort was made to provide

funding to train the brightest of students to defend our country's interest in what became known as the Cold War" (Jolly, 2009a, p. 39). On the heels of this newly founded energy to revamp the education system in our nation, as well as recognize the most able students, The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed in 1958. The primary purpose of NDEA was to bolster the math and sciences curriculum.

Wickstrom (2004) stated, "Since gifted students had the ability to make significant contributions to the nation's welfare, especially in the essential areas of science and technology it was vital to develop programs to assist them achieving their full potential" (p. 268). As a result of NDEA, college classes were offered in the high school, foreign languages, once reserved for high school students, became available in the elementary school, and "bright and talented students were expected to take tough courses to fulfill their potential, and submit their developed abilities for service to the nation" (Tannenbaum, 1979, p. 11).

Although the Soviets can be viewed as the impetus behind the NDEA, the United States Congress provided federal funding, and guidelines to meet the challenge of educating the brightest and most capable students. Fleming (1960) stated, "The educational focus of the nation was:

Motivating, the discovery of intelligent and talented young men and women and stimulating them to devote themselves to the sciences, foreign languages, technology, and in general to those intellectual pursuits that will enrich personal life, strengthen resistance to totalitarianism, and enhance the quality of American leadership on the international scene. (p. 132).

Unfortunately, the fervor ignited by Sputnik sputtered out within a short time frame. “Once the United States launched its own satellites, the initial frenzy and paranoia abated and the special attention and funding given to gifted education diminished as well” (Jolly, 2009a, p. 48). Several factors that contributed to the dwindling support of gifted education were a growing anti-intellectualism campaign and the turbulent Civil Rights movement (Kliebard, 2004, Wickstrom, 2004) and President Johnson’s Great Society Programs (Ford & Harris, 1999).

Federal Legislation in Gifted Education

The Supreme Court’s ruling in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, set in motion a series of “significant, yet incomplete, gains in equal educational opportunities for many children, most notably minorities, females, and students with disabilities” (Wickstrom, 2004, p. 265). The desegregating of the public schools of the nation, the War on Poverty, and President Johnson’s Great Society programs inadvertently undercut the tenuous path gifted education was traversing (Ford & Harris, 1999; Urban & Wagoner, 2004; Wickstrom, 2004). “The promise to the gifted of the late 1950s that might have flowered under President Kennedy’s leadership waned under President Johnson’s Great Society programs, which emphasized services for the educationally disadvantaged and economically deprived” (Wickstrom, 2004, p. 270).

As the nation’s population came face-to-face with the crippling effects of racism, poverty, and lack of equity in federal, state, and local services to the most marginalized of its people, it is not surprising that funding and attention for gifted students became derailed. Providing special services to the most highly capable students in the nation

smacked of elitism. Some believed that acknowledging different students require different strategies was anti-American and clashed with the values of America, that all be treated equally. In their zeal to be democratic, those individuals who were critical of special programs for gifted learners as well as below average students, ignored “the importance of group differences (e.g., gender, race, socio-economic status) as general guidelines from which to educate children” (Ford & Harris, 1999, p. 17).

During the Nixon administration, Congress requested the appointed Commissioner of Education, Sidney P. Marland, to conduct a study to determine the efficacy of services being provided to gifted students. Marland’s goal was to address the research available on gifted and talented students, to conduct hearings at the local school levels to gather data, to examine instructional programs already in place for gifted students, and to make recommendations as to the direction and support necessary to improve gifted education. His findings were depressing. Jolly (2009b) related, “It has confirmed our impression of inadequate provisions for these students and added to widespread misunderstanding about their needs” (p. 43). Marland and his committee put forth the first formal definition of giftedness in the history of the United States.

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or the potential

ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination: (1) general intellectual ability, (2) specific academic ability, (3) creative or productive thinking, (4) leadership ability, (5) visual and performing arts, and (6) psychomotor ability. (Marland, 1972, p. 10)

Marland, due to his training as a teacher, was a passionate supporter for the gifted and talented children long before arriving in Washington, DC; intuitively recognized that procuring federal aid in the way of monies and programs as an uphill battle. After concluding a meeting with several Russian educators in Washington, jokingly, he asked them, “Please...send up more Sputniks” (Marland, 1973, p. 203). Without the threat to national security, Marland, like many educators, feared attention to the brightest children of the nation would diminish. The Marland Report of 1972 was revised three more times, in 1978, 1988, and in 1993. In the last revision, the category of psychomotor was eliminated (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

The Marland Report provided the momentum for several bills to be enacted to benefit gifted children. Under the administration of President Ford in 1974, several requirements were set in motion: “The Office of Gifted and Talented was created; it called for the creation of National Clearinghouse for the Gifted and Talented, and funds were made available to state and local education agencies along with grants for training, research, and projects for the gifted” (Wickstrom, 2004, p. 271).

With the publication of the Marland Report in 1972, it seemed services, support, and recognition for the highly capable children of the nation was on the upswing again. In 1978, the Gifted and Talented Children Act was implemented. The purpose of this act was to provide financial aid to states so they could “plan, develop, operate, and improve

programs for the gifted students” (Zettel, 1982, p. 61). This act, however, did not have a long life as it was overturned under the Reagan Administration with the passing of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981. This act closed down the Office of Gifted and Talented, eliminated funding from the federal government for gifted services (Ford & Harris, 1999), and categorically suspended all federal involvement in providing support for gifted students “during much of the 1980s” (Wickstrom, 2004, p. 272).

In 1983, the report *A Nation at Risk* was released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report once again focused the spotlight on the gifted and talented students of the nation, and provided a very grim report on how our gifted students, were being shortchanged. “Over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school while most gifted students should be provided with a curriculum enriched and accelerated beyond the needs of other students of high ability” (1983, p. 24). This report provided the impetus for the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students act of 1988. The Javits Act “identified gifted students as a national resource that were critical to the progress [of the nation]” (Jolly, 2009a, p. 49). While the Javits Act restored support for gifted education, it did not, however, mandate gifted programs in each state, nor did it provide due process for students much like the Individuals with Disabilities Act ([IDEA], Ford & Harris, 1999, Wickstrom, 2004).

Culturally diverse children were never considered into the equation of defining giftedness until the U.S. Department of Education in 1993 revised its original definition of giftedness to include youth as well as culture.

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by schools. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 26)

For the first time, giftedness was not reserved for the dominant class. This new interpretation of giftedness included “two historically ignored points specific to Black and other minority students: (a) students must be compared with others of their age, experience, or environment, and (b) outstanding talents are present in individuals from all cultural groups” (Ford, 2011, p. 65). With the inclusion of culture in the latest revision, it is recognized that no one particular group “has a monopoly on giftedness” (Ford, 2011, p. 71).

As with the original Marland Report of 1972, the 1993 revision, entitled *National Excellence: The Case for Developing America's Talent*, depicted the state of America's education for gifted and talented students as a dire and quiet crisis.

American education is now at a turning point – one that requires us to reach beyond current programs and practices. As the nation strives to improve its schools, the concerns of students with outstanding talents must not be ignored. International tests comparing American students with those in other countries

show that students at all levels of achievement are not performing as well as students in many other countries. (1993, p. 5)

Political Context of Gifted Education

Gifted educational services for our children of the nation has become a political football in which the well-being of our greatest resources of the nation has resulted in a love-hate relationship, with fans on both sides and no clear and definitive referee. “Critics are reluctant to support special programs for gifted students because of the fear and suspicion that intellectualism may lead to elitism” (Wickstrom, 2004, p. 265). Others bemoan special programs for highly capable children with the argument, “Those kids will make it their own, and give the extra help to the kids who really need it” (Davis & Rimm, 2004, p. 1). It should be noted that many gifted students do not make it to graduation. As many as 10 to 20% of the high school dropouts have been identified as gifted and talented students (Whimore, 1986). Some proponents of gifted education argued that the critical and advanced thinking as well as concepts taught in gifted classes would be beneficial to all students, not just those identified as gifted (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Wickstrom, 2004; Whimore, 1986).

There is no legislation to protect the rights of gifted and talented students because gifted education is not mandated. When gifted education programs are in place, they are in a precarious position and are usually the first program to be cut when budget issues arise. Purcell (1995) summed up the fate of gifted education as follows: “Programs for the gifted are being terminated because they are not politically correct as well as because of budget cutting, because of too-few supportive teachers and administrators, and because gifted education is not mandated” (p. 61). Joe Gulko, the gifted instructor for an Ohio

school district added, “It’s hard to drum up sympathy for gifted students compared to say, a special education student, in a wheelchair” (Turner, 2008, p. 1). Tannenbaum (1983), in his book, *Gifted Children: Psychological and Educational Perspectives* made the following observation about our luke-warm relationship with gifted education in the nation. “The cyclical nature of interest in the gifted is probably unique in American education. No other special group of children has been so alternately embraced and repelled with rigor by educators and laypersons alike” (p. 16).

Tannenbaum (1983) described the roller-coaster ride gifted education has traveled in the United States since its inception in the mid-1920s. “Public understanding and support, as well as federal aid [have] mirrored this pattern, waxing and waning in response to national interests” (Jolly, 2009a, p. 37). Within the field of education, there are two definite camps; one that supports the educational needs of high ability students, while the other dismisses the need for special instruction for gifted children labeling such services as elitist. The number of states that mandate gifted services and provide funding totals a dismal six, while 17 states, including the District of Columbia do not mandate gifted education, nor provide any funding. Twenty-two states mandate gifted education but only partially fund the program. Five states mandate gifted education for K-12 students but do not provide any funding. Is it any wonder that the sustainability of the gifted program stays in constant jeopardy?

The tension that gifted education has encountered centers around the debate of equity and excellence (Davis & Rimm, 2004, Ford & Harris, 1999, Wickstrom, 2004). Brown stated, “The pull of equity versus excellence has affected gifted education in the U.S. for over two centuries” (Brown, 2008, p. 1). All students, regardless of ability,

require and deserve equity and excellence in their education. However, it seems more politically safe to focus on the students who are struggling, while we ignore the needs of our most capable students. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 narrowly focused on test scores. Rather than provide educators with innovative strategies and better resources, the NCLB Act consisted mainly of threatening educators in schools with the withdrawal of funds and school takeovers if they failed to meet the standards set forth within a prescribed time frame. In our zealotry to achieve excellence for our lowest achieving students in the nation, we are neglecting the needs of our most able learners.

The implied result of NCLB is when educators in schools are held accountable for their students' progress, high school graduation rates would increase, while more students would enroll in college, better prepared for rigorous course work. The gifted population is not addressed in the NCLB Act; therefore, Goldrick-Rab and Mazzeo (2003) made the following observation:

There is limited evidence that school accountability, particularly as practiced under NCLB, will serve to either increase or decrease college participation. It seems far more likely that, in its current format, the accountability provisions of NCLB will have little long-term [effect] on college participation at all, failing to increase the odds among those already likely to attend and failing to decrease the odds amongst those unlikely to attend. Those in the middle – the students on the margin between attending and not attending college – are those most likely to be affected, but outcomes for this group are especially unclear. (p. 120)

Gentry (2006), and Kenney (2007) argued that many of the already limited resources available to schools is being further diluted due to the implementation of

NCLB, with our most talented and academically achieving students receiving the least. In their *State of the Nation in Gifted Education Report* in 2008, the National Association for Gifted Children noted that for every 100 dollars budgeted for education, less than five cents is set aside for the implementation and development of gifted programs for children in Grades K-12. For too many Black students, “Life on the margins is [an] all too familiar reality. Ford (2011) stated, “More than any other racially and culturally different students, Black youth face social and environmental problems that inhibit their achievement, motivation, and educational outcomes” (p. 10). By withholding funds from schools and stripping them of their accreditation, the NCLB Act ensures that those on the margins will continue to languish and fall behind. This policy directly affects inner city and rural gifted Black students whose schools already are underfunded.

With the implementation of school improvement plans and the NCLB Act, many schools across the nation are searching for ways to adapt to the changing needs of the educational system of our country, while simultaneously meeting the needs of the students it serves. For too long, we have been content with just proficiency. “At present, the [NCLB] Act aims the attention and resources [of the nation] at ensuring non-proficient students move systematically toward proficiency. There is no incentive for [educators in] schools to attend to the growth of students once they attain proficiency or to spur students who are already proficient to greater achievement” (Tomlinson, 2002, p. 36). The mindset that gifted students can make it on their own require no special instruction, and are an elitist population, is a fallacy that we cannot endorse. Davis and Rimm (2004) asked, should we require our nation’s most capable learners in to be successful in “spite of a frustrating educational system?” (p. 2). Are we not required to

provide equity to all students? Until our nation addresses the needs of gifted and talented students in the same manner that is afforded to slower learners, students with physical or emotional challenges, we cannot say we are providing an education of equity and excellence to all.

There is no doubt that the landmark decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education* provided a monumental impetus to bring about equity and excellence in the education of minority students. Russo, Ford, and Harris (1993) argued that it is “the cornerstone of all subsequent legal developments ensuring the rights of disenfranchised groups in the past forty years” (p. 67). The Brown decision of 1954 seeking to reverse the 1896 *Plessey v. Ferguson Supreme Court* decision that upheld separate but equal facilities for Black and White citizens as constitutional “brought about a renewed sense of hope for Black people of the 20th century, eliminating legalized segregation in U.S. public schools and offering promises of equal education” (Morris, 2008, p. 717) for all children. However, nearly 60 years later, Black students have yet to realize the full measure of the decision. “Black students still find themselves at serious educational disadvantages in many schools. Nowhere is this lack of access to equity more evident than in gifted education and AP classes, where Black and economically disadvantaged students [significantly] are underrepresented” (Ford, 2011, p. 16).

In their book, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960's to the 1990s*, authors, Omi and Winant (1994) underscored that racial progress is “never invented out of the air, but exist in a definite historical context, having descended from previous conflicts” (p. 58). It is, therefore, sensible for me to examine the existence of

gifted education within the historical and social context of racism and how it intersects with educational policy.

In my earlier discussion of the history and the political environment of gifted education, I highlighted the philosophy of Galton's *Hereditary Genius* (1869) and his conclusion that giftedness was endowed to those of White upper-class people as opposed to people of color and people of the working class. I also included a brief overview of Lewis Terman and other contributors to the field of gifted education, who used Galton's research to further perpetuate the premise agenda of White European superiority. There is no doubt that our view of giftedness, no matter how much research has been conducted, is still shaped in some form by the racist and pejorative attitudes towards people of color and working class people. The research bears out that much of what Galton and Terman believed about endowed intelligence continues to influence decisions and outcomes in relation to gifted education. Giftedness is a social construct; therefore, its meaning and existence is predicated on the discourse of those who name it. It should not go unnoticed, and it is argued by some that the surge in gifted education coincided with the ending of segregation (Morris, 2004, Oakes, Wells, & Jones, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994; Wells & Oakes, 1998).

White Supremacy and Giftedness: A Detour around Desegregation

As I write, I try to remember when the word racism ceased to be the term which best expressed for me exploitation of Black people and other people of color in this society and when I began to understand that the most useful term was White supremacy. (hooks, 1989, p. 112)

Like hooks (1989), I too have struggled with how best to describe the marginalization of Black people. The term *racism* is much more palatable than White supremacy, easier to digest, and easier to use in conversations with my co-workers and family. But I've come to realize, I'm just denying the obvious. The word *racism*, although normal in American society and "an ingrained feature of our landscape" does not convey the insidiously deep rooted need to control the lives of others as does the term *White supremacy* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi). As I have attempted to contextualize the paucity of African American students in the gifted and AP programs and their reasons, I have come, face-to-face with my own reluctance to recognize the very values and beliefs that encompass White supremacy. In doing so, I am one of many liberal Whites who have failed to understand how I personify "White supremacists' values and beliefs even though I do not "embrace racism or domination" (hooks, 1989, p. 113).

In his article, *White Supremacy*, Ansely (1997) also moves away from the term racism as he explored how, despite resistance and opposition, racial dominance has continued to thrive in our nation. In his research, Ansely concluded that White supremacy does not only include White supremacist hate groups such as the Klu Klux Klan and the Ariyan Nation Brotherhood, but also encompasses,

A political, economic, and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily reenacted across broad array of institutions and social settings. White supremacy produces material and psychological benefits for

Whites, while extracting a heavy material and psychological price from Blacks.
(p. 592)

Derrick Bell (2004), civil rights attorney, critical race theorist, and first tenured African American professor at Harvard University asserted in his book, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes of Racial Reform* that the Brown decision was not only about ending discrimination against African-American citizens but that policy change was also connected to the standing of the United States in the international stage. Bell argued that in order for the U.S. to continue to promote itself as a champion of democracy and a beacon of progress for others to emulate, it first had to address its own demons internally. Thus, as authors Omi and Winant (1994) asserted, racial progress descends from conflict.

Although the Brown's decision of 1954 paved a path for educational equality among the races, it indirectly handed the control of desegregating the schools of the nation back into the hands of the very people who argued for its defeat, namely, the White school boards whose sole interest was to uphold their White supremacist ideals and maintain control of African Americans' education. Gilborn (2005) posited that this pattern of racial inequity "is structured in domination and its continuation represents a form of tacit intentionality on the part of White power holders and policy makers" (p. 485).

In 1955, Southern states petitioned the Supreme Court to be exempted from the 1954 desegregation ruling. In what became known as *Brown II*, the court upheld their original ruling. However, in its decision concerning how best to implement the desegregation of the schools of the nation, the Supreme Court provided a legal loophole

with the phrase *all deliberate speed*. This phrase, *all deliberate speed* set into motion a series of disingenuous maneuvers to circumvent desegregation and perpetuate White supremacy in the schools of our nation.

Southern state senators and representatives banded together and drafted *The Southern Manifesto*; a document in which they pledged themselves “to use all lawful means to bring about a reversal” (Orfield, 2009, p. 4) to the Brown ruling. For nearly a decade after the Brown ruling, “intense White political resistance rather than moderate compliance crystallized” (Orfield, 2009, p. 4) across the nation. As Black Americans waited to become equal participants in their quest for educational equity, White communities with support from their elected officials began a “historical legacy of strategies to avoid integration” (Tyson, 2011, p. 7) and undermine desegregation mandates.

White communities sought to deflect desegregation through a series of overt tactics that would “cushion” (Clotfelter, 2004, p. 182) their children from attending integrated schools. Some of these tactics included the building of private schools in rural areas, gerrymandering of school zones, and the pretense of freedom of school choice within school systems, and White families moving in large numbers into nearby suburbs (Clotfelter, 2004; Patterson, 2001; Staiger, 2004; Tyson, 2011) as well as the creation of gifted and talented programs (Ogbu, 1978; Trent, 1981). Ability grouping and tracking also became prevalent after the Brown ruling.

In his article, *Educational Policy as an Act of White Supremacy*, Gilborn (2005) asserted that when considering educational policies, one must consider the following three questions: “Who or what is driving” the gifted education policy? “Who wins or

loses” as a result of the gifted education policy, and finally, “What are the effects” of the gifted education policy? (p. 492). Incorporating Omi and Winant’s (1994) theory that “racial projects are never invented out of air, but exist in a definite historical context, having descended from previous conflicts” (p. 58) propels me to challenge and deconstruct the underpinnings of the gifted program.

Ogbu (1978), in his book, *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective* concluded, “The use of IQ testing and related techniques to exclude Black children from high-quality education” intensified after the Supreme Court order of 1954 to desegregate the schools of the nation. Trent (1981) in his article, *Expert Opinion on School Desegregation Issues*, conducted a series of interviews with teachers across 18 school systems who witnessed firsthand integration implemented in their schools. His findings also supported the belief that tracking and ability grouping became a tool used in newly integrated schools. These tracking and ability grouping strategies were successful in creating a school-within-a school climate, which benefited the White students, while excluding Black students.

Meier, Stewart, and England, (1989) asserted that gifted education, ability grouping, and tracking, in conjunction with Magnet and Charter schools, have created a new wave of second-generation segregation, in which a high percentage of Black and Brown children are disproportionately underrepresented in the more rigorous course work offered in their school. Gallanger (1999) posited that the policy of gifted education is “connected to the ways modern societies manage and regulate their citizens” (p. 70).

The argument that the revival of gifted education is related to the desegregation ruling cannot be ignored when considering how power is played out in our schools and

curriculum. Apple's (1995) assertion that "schools act as agents in the economic and cultural reproduction of an unequal society" (p. 87) prompted me and other educators to consider the powerful and very real possibility that gifted education, because it is comprised mostly of White students, actually is instrumental in reinforcing racial inequities among our children. Sapon-Shevin (1994) posited that gifted education is one way in which schools continue to maintain the status quo. "Whether or not the intention of gifted programs is to reproduce existing economic and racial hierarchies or to produce cultural capital held by an elite group of students, these are in fact the consequences of such a system" (p. 192).

It is an unfortunate reality that the barometer used to critique a child's giftedness is all too often measured by the outdated, class-biased, and racist research of Galton (1869) and Terman (1916). Their research advocating the concept of giftedness based on IQ testing, although vehemently challenged by many (Borland, 2004; Margolin, 1996; Renzulli, 1986) "still influence us today, despite our repugnance" (Borland, 2004, p. 2). Educators must be cognizant of the legacy in which race and classism and their integral roles in the development of gifted education policies in the United States. Opponents of gifted education assert that separating students by ability is "counterproductive to the goals of desegregation" (Staiger, 2004, p. 179) and further segregate our children.

Issues of Power in Public Education

Where is the Justice?

When considering factors that encourage or discourage Black students from participating in gifted education or Advance Placement courses, educators must first examine the concept of justice and how it is meted out in our society. Scholars believed

the classroom is but a microcosm of the larger society (Apple, 1995, Williams, 1976). The underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and advanced classes across our nation mirrors a larger problem in our society; that of an unequal system that marginalizes the *Other*. Justice and ethics seem to go hand-in-glove and yet, ought to complement one another. However, history shows that justice and ethics have been and still can be elusive to many groups of people. When I evaluate the concept of justice in this country, I see a great disparity in the areas of gender, social class, culture, race, and sexual orientation. Who determines if a society is just and ethical? How is justice determined, defined, and by whom? Whose interest is being served? How does justice, or lack of justice, impact the classroom? The answer to each of these questions is the same, White males. Schools are microcosms of the larger society and as such often duplicate the norms of their society.

Since the earliest days of our nation, justice, human rights, and ethics have been meted out in accordance with the dominant society, that of White males. For the most part, justice is in the hands of the ruling class, however, justice can only be considered ethical and just when all peoples have a voice in the process. The many silenced voices of the *Other* are beginning to be heard. Educators who advocate a culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom are refusing to take part in the well-established colonial approach to curriculum. The move away from this colonial approach to education towards a more inclusive curriculum provides a platform for *the Others* to speak for themselves, to have their stories heard.

Since the first days of the conception of this country and indeed since the discovery of the North American continent, justice has rested in the hands of the

individual with the biggest sword or rifle. In his book, *Perversions of Justice*, Churchill (1993) stated that the early conquerors not only used brute force to acquire lands, but also used force to acquire the backing of the Catholic Church. When the subject of granting rights to Native Americans arose, Chief Justice John Marshall, realizing that the strict adherence to treating Native Americans in a civilized manner of the newly formed United States (recognizing they did have certain rights) actually hindered the U.S. from attaining lands, and thus, kept the U.S. from becoming more powerful, purposefully misconstrued the law in order to take the lands away from the Native Americans. The oppressive U.S. government used the law to legally oppress.

The underpinnings of the governing of our nation were derived from the Greeks and Roman culture. Plato's *Republic* promoted the belief that a just society is a society in which all people know their place. Plato also advocated that only the elite (White males) should rule and all others should serve. This belief is very similar to one that permeates our culture today. Those who determine the components of a just society are usually the ruling class. Case in point: the controversy concerning the recently appointed Supreme Court Justice, Sonja Sotomayer, has caused much angst along the right winged population. Many people feel threatened that the Judicial System will no longer support the status quo colonial perspective when a Latina female is appointed. Sotomayer expressed the inclination to use her cultural and personal experiences when making decisions from the bench; therefore, she was seen as a threat to those who received the privileges of a court that was made up of individuals who were like them. Justice is present only when all peoples are provided the same opportunities to have a voice in how society is operated. King (2001) stated, "It is a historical fact that privileged groups

seldom give up their privileges voluntarily” (in Carson, 2001, p. 191). Dr. King and his supporters sought to nullify the class system advocated by Plato in which people are boxed into particular roles with little or no chance to move up.

Although we have made great progress as a nation, the United States has a similar structure as set forth by Plato. Certain classes of people (usually White males) have been regarded as the elite and are groomed to be the rulers and shakers of our nation, while the underclass (people of color, women, and poor individuals of all races) are regulated to subservient roles. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advocated non-violent, civil disobedience in response to the injustice treatment Black Americans were experiencing in America. While imprisoned in a Birmingham jail for participating in Civil Rights demonstrations, King responded to an open letter published in the local newspaper from eight prominent clergy who criticized him and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for their untimely demands for equality for Black citizens. Dr. King eloquently explained the framework for the non-violent movement and his disappointment with the “White moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice” (King, Jr., as cited in Carson, 2001, p. 195). Through Dr. King’s leadership, the Civil Rights movement was successful, but Civil Rights legislation did not occur until the oppressors were forced to come to the negotiating table.

The enacted health care bill put forth by the Obama administration is a further example of how an injustice, long-tolerated, endorsed, and safeguarded by the privileged, and whose attempts by the working class to be included, have been thwarted by the ruling class for generations. “Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without

this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation” (King, Jr., as cited in Carson, 2001, p. 196). Justice then is not stagnant, but rather elusive, malleable, and even fluid. It is subject to change when those in power recognize *the Other* has been excluded and are drawn into the process of creating a just society. However, justice does not arrive easily, for “Few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action” (King, Jr., as cited in Carson, 2001, p. 198). Justice, therefore, is not an absolute because it varies from society to society and within societies themselves. Justice is always in flux because the oppressed challenge their oppressors. When the marginalized rise up and challenge the oppressors, justice is reevaluated, polished, and redelivered.

The perspective that justice is stable and absolute is negated by the number of Supreme Court amendments and the continuous quest for social justice. Ethical/judicial behavior for society is determined by this sect because the ruling social class has the upper hand. As noted earlier, even the laws can be used to oppress others when it is beneficial to the ruling class. Those in power determine the worth of the Other and unless those in power are checked, they will continue to force their will on us all. Noddings (1998) warned, “When a substantial part of the population is content, social change is very hard to effect” (p. 166).

William Pinar (2004) advocated the public school classroom as the best place to implement a social justice curriculum. In the classroom, “educators can create in students an awareness of social injustices” (p. 29) in their communities and on a global stage as

well. Sleeter and Grant (2007) held that in order for teachers to serve their students better, teachers need to be in tune with the diversity of their students, most especially those of color and females (p. 72). Educators must be cognizant of the power they hold in the classroom and how their power through curriculum choices can exclude or include the Other.

Power in the School

Most people assume that schools are neutral environments, free from political pressures, and a safe haven that does not promote one particular perspective, while forsaking another. Apple (1990) contended however, that schools are, in fact, very political and should be viewed as “powerful agents in the economic and cultural reproduction of class relations in a stratified society like our own” (p. 8). He referred to this as social reproduction. Apple noted that many educators and theorists alike, have acknowledged “that school in advanced industrial societies like our own may serve certain social classes rather well and other classes not well at all (p. 29). Thus, the notion that schools are a neutral environment is a fallacy; for they do indeed perpetuate a curriculum of social, cultural, and economic ideology.

Classrooms and schools represent a culture of power to the extent that they mirror unjust social relations existing in the larger society. Profoundly aware of the mechanisms by which power has functioned historically to silence and marginalize certain social groups through the schooling process, progressive educators committed to social justice seek to disrupt and problematize such social relations in the classroom and in their schools. (Applebaum, 2003, p. 151)

Educators who continue to promote the cycle of social reproduction that excludes the Other can be likened to abusers who consistently abuse because “they feel entitled to exploit, will do anything in order to exploit, and will exploit precisely as much as they can get away with” (Jensen, 2006, p. 559). As a teacher, I am required to deliver and teach a curriculum required by the state and deemed appropriate for all students. The question of whose knowledge is worthy of being taught and whose knowledge is not worthy pleads to be reckoned with. Teachers do not have much input into how the curriculum they teach is selected, and as such, become *de facto* abusers in a regime that disallows Otherness to be recognized. Raymond Williams (1976) argued that schools use a form of hegemony in which “educational institutions are usually the main agencies of transmission of an effective dominant culture...which certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded” (p. 205). When teachers are denied a voice in the decision making of the curriculum, the students who have no knowledge of what is being omitted cannot complain. Thus, the established hegemonic perspective continues to thrive in our schools. The following quote from Lukes (1974) underscores how those individuals without power are often lured into compliance.

Second, and more important, is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as natural and beneficial? To assume that the absences of grievance

equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat. (p. 24)

When educators are not included in determining the curriculum to be taught, the expertise of the teachers is minimized and the cultural capital of the students, most especially the culture of diverse students, is excluded. In considering the question of where power is located and what are the possibilities for transformation, Daniel Egan (2005) in his book, *Power: A Critical Reader* noted that Herbert Marcuse, a member of the Frankfurt School of critical theorists was interested in understanding why people who could improve their position in society and transform how they interacted in the economic structure of their society were “either unaware of those interests or not act on them” (p. 2). This line of thinking coincides with Lukes (1974) who argued that the most fatal component of power is when it is not observable readily. When power is under the radar,

It is taken for granted; from this perspective, power is so thoroughly embedded in the patterns of our everyday lives that we cannot see how it shapes us. How can we rebel against power if we are not aware of its presence in our lives? (Egan, 2005, p. 33)

Egan’s and Lukes’ viewpoints support Delpit’s code of powers enacted in the classroom. Throughout his book, *Education and Power*, Apple (1995) spoke of social reproduction in the school and society. “Schools act as agents in the economic and cultural reproduction of an unequal society. Nor is there any lack of evidence that a hidden curriculum in schools exists, one that tacitly attempts to teach norms and values to students that are related to working in this unequal society” (p. 87). Egan (2005) posited

that the working class has no input in the production of their work and as such claim no ownership or personal value in the finished product and therefore can and often do view their professions as oppressive. Is it possible that our nation's students feel the same?

Apple's (1995) theory of social, cultural, and economic reproduction theory is alive and thriving in our school system with the end result culminating in a two tier class system in our nation's public schools, one of dominant class and the other the subordinate class. This two - tier system denies an exemplary education to the marginalized and the privileged alike because it withholds the opportunity for discourse and inquiry about the divergent cultures that make up a student's community. I further contend that because a two tier system of education has long been practiced, the neediest of the student population; minority and working class students, are denied the very basic skills necessary in order to propel themselves out of the marginalized class.

In his book, *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple (1990) argued that schools perpetuate a hidden curriculum through hegemony. He also asserted, "Education is not a neutral enterprise" (p. 1), but rather an institution that promotes the reproduction of the dominant class and their perspective and values. "The knowledge that got into schools in the past and gets into schools now is not random. It is selected and organized around sets of principles and values that come from somewhere, that represent particular view of normality and deviance, of good and bad, and of what good people act like" (p. 63). Who is deciding which people are good, and whose stories are told?

Williams (1976) noted, "The educational institutions are usually the main agencies of transmission of an effective dominant culture" (p.205). As such, they have the power to decide what knowledge is passed along and what knowledge is omitted.

Williams referred to this as selective tradition. This process allows certain cultures to be emphasized while others are “reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture” (Apple, 1990, p. 6). Delpit (2002) in her book, *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom* argued, “When instruction is stripped of children’s cultural legacies . . . the students don’t identify with the teachers who question their intelligence or with a curriculum that ignores their existence” (p. 41). Curriculum that ignores some cultures while promoting others is one more example of how vital it is that teachers be cognizant of the power they yield in the classroom. Delpit’s argument is congruent with Apple’s theory of power, which is played out in the institutions we call schools.

According to Apple’s social/cultural/economic reproduction theory, schools play a significant role in promoting a two-class system, consisting of the dominant (ruling) class, and the subordinate class. “Society is structured to maintain the dominance of those in power and to perpetuate the subordinate status of those in the underclass, and social institutions, such as the educational system, the hierarchical stratification found in the larger society” (Borland, 2004). The organization and dissemination of knowledge in schools today is closely related to “earlier educational attitudes of dominant groups in society and still carry historical weight and are exemplified even in the bricks and mortar of the school buildings themselves” (Apple, 1990, p. 47). It is extremely difficult for the stories of the marginalized to be heard because the curriculum is so deeply embedded in the Eurocentric perspective.

No Permission Slip, No President Obama!

An example of how power in school is used to further the agenda of the dominating class is the debacle surrounding President Obama's *Back-To-School Address to the Students of the United States* during September of 2009. Media conservative journalists, radio, and television commentators used incendiary rhetoric to whip up fear and anxiety. They implied that President Obama through his address would somehow indoctrinate into their children a warped sense of values. There were petitions sent out in many communities decrying his use of public office to supposedly put forth his liberal leftist agenda. Editorials were written and many school boards across the nation banded together to censor his address. Under the guise of allowing parents a choice, my own school board sent out a letter to each and every student, informing parents of the President's *Back-to-School* address. The letter informed parents if they wanted their child to watch the Presidential address, they would have to first sign a permission slip, and then at the board's discretion, students would be allowed to watch a taped version to be shown at a later date. Students would not be allowed to watch the address live.

It is important to note that the letter was sent home on the Friday before a long holiday. Not only would students have the letter and permission slip in their book bags over the weekend, but they would not return until the day of the address. Our school has a long standing practice that we do not send important announcements home on Fridays because the probability of them being read are slim to none. It has been our experience that most book bags do not get opened over the course of the weekend. Many people, myself included, surmised that the intention of the board was to prevent students from watching the first Black President address the nation's children. That the school board hid

behind the fact that the address would be held at noon, a time when most students would be at lunch as their reason for delaying the live viewing and opting instead for a taped version at a later date could have been somewhat believable, but to require parents to sign a permission slip to hear the Presidential address sounded like double talk.

It was worth noting also that the permission slip/letter from the superintendent concerning the President's address was delivered to the school at two o'clock in the afternoon. All available teachers and paraprofessionals were summoned to the office to get the letter to the homeroom teachers before bus call. Most of the schools in our county dismiss between 2:30 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. By providing very little time for teachers to react to this decision, the School Board would ensure minimal participation.

Faculty members were sent an email (a warning) from the Superintendent that although the U.S. Department of Education had created lesson plans to support and supplement President Obama's address to the children of the nation, we were not, under any circumstances, to avail ourselves to them in any way. We were also informed that access to Channel One in the Middle School and High School would not be permitted on the day of Tuesday, September 8, 2009, or the next day, when a recapping of the President's address was sure to be mentioned.

To say I was outraged is an understatement. I spoke with my principal and made my feelings known. I requested that I be allowed to take the day of the President's address off so that my son Isaiah and I could watch the speech together. The principal was very sympathetic but could not grant me the day off because it was in conjunction with a holiday. County policy does not allow an employee to be absent the day prior or

day after a holiday. I would have to request the day off from the superintendent. I hand delivered and emailed the following letter to my superintendent.

Dear Sir,

I am writing to share with you my disappointment concerning our school system's decision not to allow the student body to watch President Obama's address to the nation's children on September 8, 2009.

As a social studies teacher and a former Sergeant of the United States Army, I feel it is disrespectful to the office of the President and the values I hold dear. I believe the decision to withhold the President's address from the student body is a poor decision and I do not wish to be complicit in this action.

I am requesting permission to be absent from my duties on Tuesday, September 8, 2009, so that I may stay home with my child and view the President's address. Since September 8, 2009, directly follows a holiday, my principal has informed me that I must notify you in writing of my decision to take a personal day. She is aware of my feelings and has given me permission to petition you in this matter.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Evans

My request for a personal day was denied. The Superintendent informed me I could, however; watch the Presidential Address live with my son, with the stipulation that we do so in an isolated room and contingent upon there being adequate personnel to cover my duties in the classroom. Although I was not completely satisfied with the decision, I accepted the compromise offered. Ten minutes before the address, I slipped out of my room and walked four classrooms down to get Isaiah out of his fifth grade

classroom. As we quietly walked down the hallway and entered the Media Center, we exchanged nervous smiles.

“I didn’t think you’d be able to do it, Mama,” Isaiah said to me in a subdued whisper. He was well aware of how I felt. He was privy to the discussions between my husband and me as I weighed the pros and cons of challenging the board’s and Superintendent’s decision. Isaiah did not comprehend fully the gravity, to which I rendered myself when I publically disagreed with my boss, and he did not completely understand the covert manner in which President Obama was being slighted, but for me, it was vitally important that he not be denied the opportunity to witness the first President of color address the children of the nation. As we listened to the President speak to the children assembled before him, it was almost like we were there with them. We were a part of history in spite of the deliberate attempt to sabotage the President’s message and his credibility.

In his book, *Dear White America: Letter to a New Minority*, Tim Wise (2012) described the manner in which many White conservatives refuse to accept a man of color as our President.

But even more instructive has been the upsurge in White anger aimed at this president, which has so often manifested in blatantly racist way. For instance, we’ve repeatedly witnessed White conservative activists coming to rallies with signs picturing the president as an African witch doctor. (Wise, 2012, p. 63)

Never before has a sitting President been subjected to such visceral attacks. It is of course not unusual for politicians to be criticized for their policies; however, the attacks on this President have focused on issues designed to discredit and humiliate him.

The fury over his Back-to-School speech, the constant questioning of his U.S. citizenship, his academic credentials, and his religious beliefs, are just a few of the examples of how some of us cannot accept “the presence of a Black man atop the political system of the nation” (Wise, 2012, p. 65). These blatant attempts coupled with covert maneuvers to portray our President as someone to be feared, distrusted, and disrespected sends a subliminal message to our children of the nation.

Over the course of my 22 years teaching, we have never had to secure permission from parents for students to watch any assembly, play, or listen to a guest speaker. We have had missionaries come and speak; we have had Veteran’s Assemblies; local politicians as well as fund raising activities. The reprehensible manner in which President Obama’s authority has been challenged has surfaced itself even in the morning news show put on by the fourth and fifth graders at my school. When reporting last year about President Obama’s trip to Latin America, the students repeatedly referred to him as *Obama* rather than as President Obama. Finally, it wasn’t until President Obama had begun his second term in office that our media specialist added his portrait to the other Presidents that adorn the wall over the libraries windows.

Macdonald (1995) explained, “Democratic processes, and especially the sharing of power through participation, are cornerstones of democracy, adding that in schools, as in many other places of work, the Bill of Rights is effectively ‘parked at the door’” (p. 122). As the public schools become more and more saturated with business and corporate influences, teachers are losing control of their curricular and pedagogic skills in favor of becoming deskilled and reskilled (Apple, 1995, p. 133).

This trend of stripping teachers of their autonomy to make choices and pursue content suitable for their students has become a nationwide epidemic through the “prepackaged sets of curricular materials” (Apple, 1995, p. 131). Although most school systems allow teachers to view various curricular materials and cast a vote for their choice, it really is a charade, as the selection for viewing is limited and materials are preselected by the school system. This administrative bias further limits the teachers from making informed decisions.

Deskilling occurs when teachers are not free to create their own curriculum, while the reskilling occurs when teachers are mandated to use teacher scripted lesson plans. This degrading process does not provide any teacher input or creativity and is also a covert way in which the curriculum can be controlled. It should be noted, however, that teachers are not always complicit with these mandates. Many teachers faced with this insulting requirement sincerely believe as Macdonald does that, “Education is a moral enterprise rather than simply a set of technical problems to be saved” (1995, p. 10) will resist and engage in “generating their own creative responses to dominant ideologies” (Apple, 1995, p. 142).

Educators must be willing to engage in honest discourse that centers on the value of those who have long been oppressed. This type of dialogue will lead to a counter-hegemonic curriculum (Apple, 1995). Teachers “need to affiliate with cultural, political, and economic groups who are self-consciously working to alter the institutional arrangements that set limits on the lives and hope of so many people in this society” (Apple, 1990, p. 166).

Egan (2005) asserted that power is never an absolute. He posited that social justice agendas that address the inequalities oppressed people face, from the very intuitions that should benefit all, are the best way to ensure the issues the marginalized endure are heard. “Every advance in democracy and equality in history has been the result of conflict, of mobilization by marginalized, oppressed, and exploited social groups that challenged the legitimacy of existing social institutions” (p. 333). Social movements take issue with harmful policy and practices and provide a safety net in which people can come together in solidarity to voice their discontent. In order to truly present a democratic curriculum, educators in schools must re-educate themselves. We must be cognizant of the hegemony and ideology that we ourselves are the products of and strive to stamp out the mindset that there is only one true and absolute perspective.

Power in the Classroom

The issue of power in society is not a new phenomenon, but many educators are reluctant to recognize the issue of power in the classroom and how it can perpetuate dominance over already marginalized students. Teachers are charged with defining a student’s level of intelligence and their opinion often serves to guide that student’s choices in electives, as well as what track to pursue, such as technical or college prep. Michael Apple (1995) contemplated, “Who ultimately gains the most from the ways our schools, and the curriculum and teaching practices within them are organized?” (xxiii). What resources the teacher offers to her students in the way of textbooks, technology, and standards can and are instrumental in determining how students are prepared for their role in society.

For the most part, schools are set up to reflect the values and culture of the middle class White population, which is the overarching branch of power in our society. As such, children from minority and working class families often arrive at school unprepared and quickly are labeled as deficient and in need of remediation. Lisa Delpit (2006) in her book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* believed students can only be empowered when their teachers recognize the power they themselves hold. She examined how the culture of power is played out in the classroom.

1. Issues of power are enacted in the classroom.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power”.
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of it – or least willing to acknowledge its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 24).

In order for students to be successful brokers in the culture of power, they have to be active participants in the process. This can be achieved when teachers realize the power they hold. In *Ways With Words*, Heath (1983) conducted a study of oral interactions between middle class White students, working class White and Black students, and their teachers. She concluded that working class children often misunderstood directives because they were proffered as requests rather than explicit commands. For example, the teacher might say, “Is this where the scissors belong?” (p.

280). The instruction, although in the form of a question, is understood by the middle class student to be a directive; however, the working class students whose parents are much more direct in their commands, would most likely conclude they that are being asked a question, and they might reply with an answer the teacher might interpret as inappropriate and consequently be labeled as discipline problems.

Delpit's (2006) assessment of how power is played out in the classroom is especially relevant when teachers are interacting with Black students. She refers to the mismatch between student and teacher as "Veiled commands" within the codes of power (p. 34). Delpit's (2006) 'code of power' referred to the actual language we speak and write in. The disconnection between student and teacher further exacerbates the achievement gap and creates a barrier for these students to gain admittance into the political game of equality. Authors, Snow, Arlman-Rup, Hassing, Josbe, Joosten, and Vorster (1976) in their article *Mother's Speech in Three Social Classes* concluded that mothers of working class children were more explicit in their directives than middle class mothers. Students must be given explicit instruction on the various codes of language if they are to be full participants in the political game of life.

Teachers must be cognizant that children of color and poor backgrounds are served better when they do not hide the rules of the game from them. When teachers do not convey to students the need to speak or write in the appropriate *code* of language at any given time, they leave the students struggling to find the codes themselves, and often they do not. White teachers of Black students are often reluctant to see themselves as the expert as if: "Somehow, to exhibit one's personal power as expert source is viewed as disempowering one's students" (Delpit, 2006, p. 32). However, when teachers, whether

well intentioned or not, deny their students the tools that provide them with the ability to be equal players at the bargaining table, they are abdicating their moral ethics as educators. In essence, the teacher is misusing her power in the classroom to keep her minority children subordinate. Teachers who engage in this practice create a classroom environment in which their students are not served justly.

Let there be no doubt: A ‘skilled’ minority person who is not also capable of critical analysis becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly. Yes, if minority people are to affect the change which will allow them to truly progress, we must insist on ‘skills’ within the critical and creative thinking. (Delpit, 2006, p. 19)

Delpit (2006) has received much criticism and backlash for her stance that Black students need explicit teaching in the area of skills. Delpit, while advocating the use of skills and explicit teaching in the writing and oral language acquisition of Black students is in no way promoting the idea that we return to the regime of skills and drill, rote memorization, and low level knowledge, but instead, insists that a combination of skills along with critical thinking will better empower Black children, and give them the necessary tools to “Participate in meaningful and liberating work” (p. 19).

Schools: A Place of Recognition or Misrecognition?

Confirmation, tolerance, and recognition- are they synonymous? Bingham (2001) citing John Locke’s definition of tolerance asserted that tolerance is “the acknowledgement that a person’s religious or cultural horizon is important enough not to be challenged” (p. 60). Tolerance can be thought of as the bare minimum, while

recognition, in contrast, is "... not just a courtesy we owe people; tolerance is a vital human need" (p. 60). Recognition, therefore, goes beyond just mere tolerance, the attitude that we just put up with the Other because it is politically smart or savvy. Recognition theorists such as Charles Taylor (1994) and Martin Buber (1965) affirmed that recognition goes deeper than tolerance because people do not live in a vacuum or in isolated bubbles, and as such, "The self attains consciousness through another... that the self is dependent on another as she comes to understand who she is" (p. 61). Kalantzis and Cope (2009) caution that while "recognition might be a mark of acknowledgement and a strategy to make students and families feel they belong, it does not necessarily tackle the question of access...sometimes, this kind of recognition of difference feels tokenistic or patronizing" (p. 26).

Infusing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom is an ideal way in which to model confirmation (Bingham, 2001). Bingham added, "It is incumbent upon educators to combat oppressive social scripts by practicing recognition" (p. 111). Public school classrooms, one hopes, is a safe haven where children can freely express and explore the differences and commonalities of society. Within the shelter of the classroom, students and teachers are enabled to examine Otherness through literature, role - playing, and the normal give-and-take process of living together.

Most school systems today have a mission statement that speaks to promoting their students as citizens who can interact in a global society. However, what many of us forget is that children come to us with habits and learned attitudes (Bingham, 2001). Many schools claim to embrace a multicultural approach to learning, have a vast collection of multicultural literature on their shelves, and pay homage to various cultures

through monthly programs that highlight Hispanics, women, and African Americans, and yet in reality, do not “speak to the psychological habits that need to be cultivated if students and teachers are to actually learn to recognize one another (Bingham, 2001). In other words, many of us are just lip - syncing! This is especially relevant to African American gifted students who face a number of challenges in academia that their White peers do not. When teachers put into praxis and model the theory of confirmation, the habits of discounting Otherness around us will no longer continue to prevail.

In order to foster confirmation of gifted Black students in our classrooms and avoid tokenism, Kitano (1991) asserted that educators must become agents of cultural pluralism and renounce the cultural assimilation model. Educators, who advocate the cultural assimilationist perspective, require that gifted minority students abdicate their “original culture” (p. 7) in order to be competitive with the dominant group. Cultural pluralists promote maintaining and supporting “diverse ethnic groups’ retention of original culture within the boundaries necessary to maintain and advance society as a whole” (p. 7).

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass,
like abundant rain on tender plants. (Deuteronomy 32:7)*

Introduction

It is my belief that gifted African American students face a number of factors that influence their decision to remain or leave the gifted, AP, and Honors programs. In order to develop my study to support these beliefs, I focused on several bodies of literature, including the concept of Whiteness and White privilege (Howard, 2006; Landsman, 2005; Paley, 2000; Thandeka, 2007; Wise, 2008), culturally relevant pedagogy (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994,1999, 2005; Hale, 1986, 2001, 2004; Kunjufu, 2002, 2005; Thompson, 2002, 2004;); and issues of power in the American public school system (Apple, 1990, 1995, Egan, 2005, Lukes, 1974).

Defining Curriculum Inquiry

According to Schubert (1986), if one were to read a dozen curriculum books, “one would come up with 12 different definitions of curriculum” (p. 26). In his book, *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*, Jackson (1992) asserted the confusion and conflict over the definition of curriculum is trifold: “Definitional, perspectival, and professional” (p. 4). Most teachers, when asked to define curriculum, provide a very simplistic answer such as, curriculum is what I teach, things like reading, math, social studies, and science. I, too, thought of curriculum in the same manner until I entered the Curriculum Studies program at Georgia Southern University. I now know how much more inclusive curriculum is and how narrow and restricted my perspective of curriculum

once was. Through my exposure to the various paradigms in curriculum studies, I am now aware of how oppressive many of us, as educators are; and how we are so dismissive of the Other in our classroom. I have learned how my own values can cause me to have a distorted vision of my students. Through my readings, I have become acutely sensitive to how my background, gender, and race can play an integral part in oppressing those students whose lived experiences are different from mine.

As I progressed through the Curriculum Studies Program at Georgia Southern, I became keenly aware that “curriculum is a complicated conversation” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 848). Curriculum is highly interrelated, and as such, it weaves together history and many other disciplines. Curriculum then, weaves together the lived experiences of all to create the fabric of our society and her people. It is according to Pinar, “A highly symbolic concept. It is what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation” (1995, p. 847). Curriculum is of course, facts, dates, events, and people, but who decides whose history is worth retelling? Even more importantly, who decides what stories will not be told? “We are what we know... and what we don’t know. If what Americans know about themselves ... is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness, then the American identity-both as individuals and as Americans- is fragmented” (Pinar, et al., 1995, p. 328-329). The omission of certain cultures, the minimizing of the Others’ experiences perpetuates a hegemonic society, which deprives the marginalized their voice, and the dominating class to retain their superiority. Whitaker (2006) encourage us to think beyond the brick and mortar of the classroom. Whitaker added, “Think of the possibilities, including a curriculum that is representative, inclusive, and informative,

which offers a view from elsewhere, a view from many positions, and a chance to see with new eyes, a chance to participate in dialogue, and increased time for engagement.

Concept of Whiteness and White Privilege

The majority of teachers are White, middle class females. They are often out of touch with the lives and events of their students because many of them live outside the community in which they teach. I liken this mismatch of teachers and students to being culturally bankrupt. Gary Howard (2006), in his book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, encouraged educators to look through “the lens of indigenous experience” (p. 38) to gain insight into the lived experiences of the marginalized student population. We cannot do as Vivian Paley (2000) did when she first set out teaching in multicultural classrooms. She said, “We showed respect by completely ignoring Black people as Black people: color blindness was the essence of the creed” (p. 9).

Many White educators think it is appropriate to be color blind when it pertains to our students. Some of us even boast that we “treat all kids the same and don't even see color” (Wise, 2008, p. 21) as if somehow, when we ignore the pigment of their skin, they will become invisible. But that is what we hope for, whether unconsciously or consciously, for our students of color to be invisible. Ellison (1952) in his novel, *Invisible Man* described the invisibility Black people feel, not because of any chemical empowerment but because of the refusal of certain people to see him. “I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (Ellison, p. 3). Cloaking children

under the veil of invisibility provides White educators a safe haven in which we do not have to confront our own racist beliefs.

It is essential that White teachers recognize the privilege they enjoy because of their skin color. White educators must be made aware, either in pre-service or staff development, that race is not a biological difference, but rather one of historical and social oppression. In her paper, *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, McIntosh (1988) speaks of White privilege as a set of unearned privileges based solely on skin color. “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 74).

I have benefited from this invisible knapsack all my life. The perks and benefits afforded to me because I am White are numerous. Never have I had to wonder if the loan I am applying for will be denied because I am White. Seldom am I followed in a store or ignored when waiting for a table in a restaurant. I have never had to ponder did the color of my skin affect my employment prospects. Whiteness for me, has “conferred authority upon me, and power... being White was a source of protection” (Wise, 2008, p. 51).

I remember one incident, in particular, in which White privilege initially worked for me, but then backfired. My husband, William, and I were both Active Duty Army at the time, stationed at Ft. Gordon, Georgia. Interracial marriages during the late 1970s were not unusual in the Armed Forces. Many GI’s had Asian wives. Marriages between Black and White soldiers were becoming more frequent as were marriages between Black soldiers and White civilian women overseas. Paradoxically here in the States, the marriages between Asian and American GI’s were not considered as interracially mixed unions and, as such, did not receive much stigma in the civilian sector. Yet, when Black

and White couples arrived in the States, we did not benefit from the same acceptance. As a newlywed couple in the South, we, William and I, were both aware of the sentiment towards our union and had experienced various levels of backlash, ranging from hostile stares, crude gestures, to verbal abuse. Often, when we encountered these reactions, we would ignore them and move on. Sometimes my good sense, however, would leave me and I would become agitated enough to speak back to the offending party. William, native son of Georgia, however, would rein me in. His first hand experiences growing up during the Jim Crow laws left him with a more profound understanding of the hopelessness of acknowledging intolerance and ignorance in bigoted people. His good sense and cool head kept us safe.

One weekend, soon after our first year of marriage, we decided to take a trip up to North Georgia. On our return back to Augusta, we pulled off the highway and followed the signs to a motel. As we drove up to the motel, we devised a plan; I would go into the motel and pay for the room, William would stay in the car. Once I got the key, we would then bring our stuff inside the room. I felt like we were fugitives, but by now, I was pregnant with our first child and my days of confronting bigots, on their turf took a backseat to safety and common sense.

We approached the motel and parked across from the front office. The motel was typical of highway motels during the 1970s; the office was in the middle of the structure, single story, and the rooms spread out from it on both sides. The driveway was of gravel and there were geraniums and mums in planters that bordered the entrance to the office. The proverbial Coke machine was outside next to the office. There were several cars in the parking lot.

I pushed the screen door open and entered the office and as my eyes adjusted to the dimness of the room, I looked around and seeing no one present, I called out “hello.” A woman in her late sixties shuffled in from an adjoining room and stood behind the desk. She had at one time, brown hair, but now it was mostly streaked with gray, pulled back in a messy ponytail. Her face was deeply tanned and lined with the effects of too much sun or smoking, I couldn’t tell. Most likely smoking I surmised, as she had a cigarette dangling from her mouth. Her hands were rough and a bit gnarled, perhaps from arthritis. Her nails were jagged and the tips of her fingers were tinged brown from nicotine. Her eyes were a faded blue and one of them was very cloudy. She wasn’t very tall, and she was somewhat stooped over, most likely as a result of osteoporosis. Just past her hanging on the wall next to a calendar, was a tattered and torn Confederate Flag alongside the American Flag. Being from the North, I did not understand at the time the significance of the Confederate Flag, so no alarms went off in my head. I explained that I wanted a room for the evening.

“Are you alone, ‘cause it cost extra for two people,” she informed me.

“No. There are two of us,” I replied. She pushed the registration card towards me along with a pen and I proceeded to fill it out. One of the items on the form was the car license tag number. I turned away from the desk and stepped out of the office and was about to trot over to the car to get the tag number when her voice halted me.

“You don’t need to get that tag number, Sugar, you look safe to me.” I returned to the desk to complete the form. We began a light banter about where I was coming from and where I was heading to. I kept my answers purposefully vague and I asked her how long she had been in the motel business. She was in mid-sentence in her response when

she abruptly stopped speaking. I looked up at her. I had finished with the form by this time and was reaching into my pocketbook to get my wallet in order to pay her for the room.

“Is that your car, the brown Chevrolet,” she asked simultaneously pointing behind me. I didn’t pick up right away on how things were going but the incredulousness in her voice indicated that something might be amiss. What could it be? She had already told me not to worry about the tag number. Perhaps we had parked in the handicapped spot? I turned around to look out the door towards the car and immediately knew what the cause of her consternation was. William had gotten out of the car and was digging around for something in the trunk! I turned back to face her and in an instant she had transformed from a friendly, talkative proprietor to a one lipped, squinty eyed, haughty individual. Her one good eye seemed to pierce right through me as she waited on my response.

“Yes, that’s my car” I replied. I continued to rummage around in my wallet pulling the bills out to pay her. Without missing a beat, she spat out with a markedly derisive scorn in her voice,

“Who’s that Black man and why is he around your car”? As I contemplated the rigidness of her face and demeanor, I ticked off in my head the various responses available to me, but they all seemed ridiculous and inherently shameful. I resented the fact that I had to explain myself to this woman. I was angry I was even considering not being truthful. Why must I accommodate her bigotry and hatefulness? I decided I would not cower to her.

“That man” and I emphasized the word man, “is my husband.” That’s when Hell broke loose in the Cotton Patch Motel on Highway 278 in Warren County, Georgia.

“Your what?” she hissed at me. “I knew you weren’t from around these parts,” undoubtedly referring to my Northern accent. “I ain’t gonna have this in my motel, no siree bob, not in my motel! Ya’ll get on away from here right now before I call the police!” As she said this last part, she began to move down the desk towards the phone. I stood there, dumbfounded. I was tired, eight months pregnant, a United States Army Non Commissioned Officer, and my bladder was about to erupt.

“Ma’am,” I said in an overly patient voice one uses with small children, “We are legally married.”

“Not in my book, you ain’t”, she boomed at me. She pulled herself up as straight as her crooked spine would allow, and with loathing contempt on her face and her eyebrows arched, picked up the phone. It was at that point I realized I was in the middle of the Civil War, and I was not on the winning side. I jammed my money down into my pocketbook and walked briskly to my car, informed William of what had transpired, and with due haste, we vacated the area!

As I reflect back on this incident, I now recognize the fear that surely gripped the old woman. Although the South had been integrated for over two decades, she had not moved forward, but rather remained rooted in place (Falk, 2004). Her refusal to let us have a room in her hotel was a fledging attempt to step back into a South that was no longer, a South that she no longer had a major role in. A mythical, nostalgic South, the South of her childhood. For many southerners, I’ve learned, “Nostalgia sits on the South like a fog on a spring morning, heavy, yet elusive” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 22). In her book, *Killers of the Dream*, Smith (1961) described how Southerners, although they knew they

were living in troubled times, resisted change and progression. “Change meant leaving one’s memories, one’s sins, one’s ambivalent pleasure, the room one was born” (Smith, 1961, p. 26). The old woman’s way of life, the Southern tradition, the segregated South, the South that most likely taught her as a child “to pray at night and ride the Jim Crow car the next morning” (Smith, 1961, p. 29) collided violently with me on that fateful afternoon in Warrenton, Georgia. Goldfield (2002), in his book, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, contended, “If the past is essential for one’s identity, then renouncing, forgetting, or ignoring that past shatters the self” (p. 3). This woman’s unwavering allegiance to remain in the past, encased in her bigotry, allowed her to retain her position of dominance and power.

W.E.B. DuBois , in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (1903) spoke of the ‘double consciousness’ many Black Americans experience in our country; experiencing life as an American but also as Black citizen, the two often at odds with one another.

After the Egyptian and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 9)

As a White educator, I cannot experience what it is like to be a Black citizen, nor “speak for Black people” (Freire, 2006, p. 48). I have however, developed my own sense of *double consciousness* of the advantages of White privilege and how these advantages have shaped my perceptions of myself and the other. In developing this double consciousness, I am enabled to examine firsthand the privileges afforded to me as a White person, how I have benefited from them, and how I am perceived by those who are oppressed by White privilege.

I am White. And because I am White I am born into a state of privilege. Even if I fight the system that has reduced us to this, I remain White, and favored by the very circumstances I abhor. Even if I am hated, and ostracized, and persecuted and in the end destroyed, nothing can make me Black. (Doll, 2006, p. 52)

Acknowledging and understanding White privilege, how it impacts students in my classroom, and indeed, all people, empowers me to stand against the status quo and be noncompliant as an oppressor. Unlike the incident back in 1989 when a fellow student in my undergraduate education class made her comment about Martin Luther King, Jr. being good for nothing but a holiday, I am no longer timid when I am confronted with racism. I no longer sit back and passively listen when I hear my colleagues, administrators, and lab students from the nearby college of education engage in demeaning dialogue about students because they are of color or receive free or reduced lunch.

As Doll (2006) eloquently stated, nothing can make me Black, and even though I detest and want to shake myself free of the privileges afforded to me as a White person, I cannot. It is difficult for many White educators in the United States to conceptualize how

the classroom would look when they are confronted with demographics, which indicate that “Whiteness may cease to be the norm ethnicity” (hooks, 1994, p. 14). White teachers must recognize the racial inequalities that have and still exist in our country and how racial inequalities play out in the curriculum. Morris concurs, “Many White scholars take for granted their whiteness and do not even think about the ways in which the traditional canon of dead White men has anything to do with dominance and oppression” (Morris, 2009, p. 269).

Coming to grips with White privilege has been for me like having an *aha* moment; a surreal experience that Landsman describes as “a split in our psyche” (2006, p. 20). In contrast to the “double consciousness” experienced by Black Americans, White Americans, because of the privileges automatically handed to them, see all experiences and peoples through “a single racial consciousness, single sight” (p. 17). This single racial consciousness cripples White Americans when they choose to ignore the unearned advantages they have inherited simply because of their skin color.

When I have broached the subject of White privilege with my colleagues and family members, I am met with blank stares and veiled hostility, then denial. Most White teachers come from a privileged background; therefore when discussions about race and racism do arise, many of us “Shut down” (Milner, 2006, p. 80) and as a result, indifference or ignorance becomes like a spear and, “Silence is used as a weapon in classrooms, faculty meetings, or even private conversations” (Ladson-Billings, 1996, p. 81).

I am reminded of a discussion in a staff development course held at my school in the library early in my teaching career. The presenter’s topic was Building Cultural

Bridges and he used the examples of incorporating Kwanzaa and Hanukkah in our curriculum. There were many of us who were sincerely interested in the topic, but there were an equal number of teachers who were not pleased at the idea. One of the teachers spoke up and said, "It's not my job to teach those kids about their culture, they should get that from home, I'm here to teach them their ABC's." She sat there, with a smug smile on her face and her arms crossed over her chest to signal the debate was settled. As some of her colleagues nodded in agreement, I watched with baited breath as the presenter struggled to maintain control. To her credit, the presenter was clear and unapologetic as she cited the benefits of incorporating cultural diversity into our curriculum.

As I walked back to my room after the training, I realized how prevalent and pervasive racism was, and how surprised I was that once again it has reared its ugly head amongst a group of people that I mistook for educated and intellectual. I wondered to myself, if my colleagues were racists' individuals or were they just overwhelmed with having to have one more thing on their plate? If I am doubtful about whether or not my colleagues are racist, is there any wonder that students wonder the same thing about their teachers? In her book, *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms*, Julie Landsman (2006) explained how students of color feel isolated when they describe incidents of racism in school. Often times, students' portrayals of incidents involving racism are often dismissed or brushed aside. White educators cannot run and hide from the issues of race in the classroom. Howard (2006) cautioned, "If we do not face dominance, we may be predisposed to perpetuate it" (p. 30). Teachers must engage in honest discourse about race in their classrooms. Yes, it is painful and scary, but when we choose to understand how White privilege and White supremacy has elevated some, while oppressing the

Other, we can slowly, methodically dismantle and expose the very infrastructure our nation was built on. Race is a social construct and as such was “created to differentiate racial groups and to show the superiority or dominance of one race over another” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 4). There are no quick fixes to the greatest problem of the twentieth century spoken of in 1903 by W.E. B. DuBois (2003), stating, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (p. 16). We are still struggling 180 years later to liberate ourselves from the shackles of broken humanity. As a White person, I will never live the reality that Black people live, but I can endeavor to comprehend this reality. Not to do so, conflicts with what I now know to be moral (Landsman, 2006).

Over the course of my 22 years teaching, I have concluded that the reason many students of color rebel and perform poorly is because their White teachers have made no room for students of color in the classroom. In her autobiography, Joycelyn Elders (1996) described how her teachers provided role models for her to emulate. Elders added, “Our teachers taught us that Black people were people of great courage and accomplishment [and] that they could raise themselves up” (p. 54). Elders’ teachers made a point of including African- American narratives and role models in their curriculum. Just as Elders prospered under her teachers’ inclusive curriculum, so too can children today. However, like my colleague in the staff development activities, many White educators avoid discussing issues of race because they are fearful. Students recognize when their culture is omitted or minimized.

They don’t think it’s important about slavery and stuff. They think that’s past and whatever and they don’t want to talk about it. Because Black people might get

mad and look at White people differently or something, maybe they're afraid of that. (Garrison-Wade & Lewis, 2006, p. 158)

Runaway Slaves and Rabid Dogs: A Distorted History Lesson

Then there are educators, who either through ignorance of their subject matter or just indifference, distort the accomplishments and struggles of African Americans. I am reminded of my son's social studies teacher in the fifth grade. On this particular night, my husband, Isaiah, and I were on our way to a local family restaurant for dinner. As we drove through town, I quizzed Isaiah for his upcoming social studies test, which would be the next day. He and his classmates were in the process of learning about slavery, state's rights, and the role of the abolitionists in attaining freedom for fugitive slaves. One of the review questions on Isaiah study guide was to give the reason (s) why some White people in the Northern states did not support the idea of offering refuge to runaway slaves. When I posed this question to Isaiah, his answer went something like this:

Well, some of the White people in the North were afraid of the runaway slaves because they thought that the runaway slaves might hurt them once they got free 'cause they were so angry about being slaves. Mrs. Youngblood said the slaves were like dogs with rabies. Nobody wants a stray dog around their property 'cause they might have rabies and dogs with rabies are real dangerous.

By the time he finished with his answer, we had arrived in the parking lot of the restaurant. My husband and I sat in a stunned silence for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality was just a few seconds, as we took in his answer. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Isaiah, where did you hear this from? Is this in your textbook?" I asked, dumbfounded.

“Mom, I told you Mrs. Youngblood told us that”

“You must have misunderstood what she said, Isaiah.” I was incredulous.

“Flip my study guide over; we had to write down what she said.”

I flipped over the study guide and sure enough, about three fourths of the ways down the paper in his illegible chicken scratch handwriting were the words, “dogs with rabies, White people scared.”

I read it over several times and then passed the paper to my husband. “Why would she say such a thing”, I asked out loud, not really addressing Isaiah or my husband. But Isaiah answered anyway.

“Well, you wouldn’t want a stray dog around your kids ‘cause you don’t know if they are friendly or dangerous. They couldn’t take any chances”, he explained in a rather nonchalant manner.

I recoiled with horror at how easily he was persuaded that runaway slaves could be in the same category as rabid dogs. Mrs. Youngblood’s analogy of comparing runaway slaves to rabid dogs, while evoking sympathy for White Northerners who for whatever reason, refused to offer sanctuary to fugitive slaves, was in my opinion, a classic example of the dominant class reaffirming its position over the marginalized. The fact that she compared Black people fighting for their freedom with rabid dogs was appalling to me.

Southern culture has put few words in the mind to make the difference between human and animal. The words in the white mind are words that turn the Negro into animal, words deliberately fed to people to place the Negro beneath the level of human, to make him not only animal, but a menace. (Smith, 1961, p. 161)

The image Mrs. Youngblood's created in her students' mind was one of Black slaves encroaching on innocent White people, with violent outcomes. In her explanation, Mrs. Youngblood introduced the irrational psychic fear that many White people experienced during this time when confronted with change they could not control, while painting the slaves as villains. In portraying Black slaves as unpredictable, and with violent tendencies, she ensured that her audience, 10 and 11 year old children, would also form a similar distorted version as truth and fact.

Mrs. Youngblood's refusal to inform Isaiah and his classmates of the realities of racism and how some White people simply did not believe Black people should have their freedom because they were Black, further instilled in her students that Black slaves were to be feared, manipulated, and controlled at all costs. Rather than hold an honest dialogue about racism in the United States during that period, or share with her students the origin and the unjust Fugitive Slave Law of 1858, Mrs. Youngblood chose instead to focus on casting the slaves as out of control, violent, and menacing. Shifting blame to the runaway slaves, ignoring the issue of racism in the United States, and comparing Black people to animals, absolved White people of any responsibility.

My husband and I spent the next half hour or so with Isaiah, deconstructing his teacher's inaccuracies. Initially, Isaiah was very reluctant to accept what we were saying because we were challenging the teacher's credibility. His unwillingness to accept our perspective underscored for us the danger and damage that can be imposed upon impressionable minds when they are provided with biased or distorted information. The epiphany for me as a teacher was, I have to get it right, and get it right the first time.

Unfortunately, for many of Isaiah's classmates, this inaccuracy learned in the classroom may well become a lifelong perception.

Before entering into the Curriculum Studies Program, I had a limited understanding of racism and how it was used to oppress. I was aware that racism existed, but I could not define racism in actuality. As it existed, racism was submerged, faceless, and nameless, but an ever present entity trailing me. In her book, *Learning to Be White*, Thandeka, (2007) described the consequences Whites pay when we choose to view life through a single, racial consciousness. We begin paying the price as young children. In the face of adult silence to racial abuse, the child learns to silence and then,

Deny its own resonant feelings toward racially proscribed others, not because it chooses to become white, but because it wishes to remain within the community that is quite literally its life. The child thus learns, layer by layer, to stay away from the non-White zones of its own desires. (p.24)

Staying clear of the non-White zones is what I did as a child. As a White child, I was learning my "Place in the racial hierarchy" (Leonardo, 2009, p. 112). Never did I think to question the Nuns or Priests when the integration of the Boston Schools was taking place. Why were the Nuns were reluctant to discuss what was happening at the footsteps of our school? Why did Sister Gilberta pull the shades down over the windows? Never did I question or challenge the O'Reilly kid when she chastised me for watching the *colored girl* on television. I did not jump up and turn the television back on. I stayed in my place. I remained silent. I am ashamed now as I recall my capitulation.

Thandeka (2007) explained my feelings as White shame. White shame "Is a deeply private feeling of not being at home within one's own White community" (p. 13).

Shame, unlike guilt, cannot be amended with an apology or reparation because guilt “is a feeling that results from a wrongful deed, a self-condemnation for what one has done. A penalty can be exacted for this wrongful act. Recompense can be made and restitution paid. Not so with shame. Nothing can be done because shame results not from something one did wrong but rather from something wrong with oneself” (p. 13). I did not challenge the adults in my life because I was fearful of being cast out. Although I was conflicted, I learned it was safer to be among the toxic and keep my thoughts to myself. The cost of that decision still haunts me.

Resisting White privilege is not an easy task. Why would I want to disrupt a system that provides benefits? A system that is tailor-made for me, a system that enables me to glide effortlessly through society, without once having to wonder if the color of my skin might be a deterrent. Wise (2008) believed that White people do not resist White privilege, because very few of us possess knowledge of White antiracist models. “One of the biggest problems in sustaining White resistance is the apparent lack of role models to whom we can look for inspiration, advice, and even lessons on what not to do” (p. 91). In her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Beverly Tatum (2003) concurred, “While the names of active racists are recalled [easily] – past and present Klan leaders and Southern segregationists, for example- the names of White allies are often unknown” (p. 108). Because White people have little knowledge of White antiracial allies, when we do speak out, we are often afraid of alienating those around us. Consequently, as a result of our ignorance and fear, we remain mute. Both authors posited that White educators must equip themselves with knowledge about White antiracist models in order to “break free from the confines of the racist socialization”

(Tatum, 2003, p. 108) that has mired them in unawareness. Through the biographies of Lillian Smith, Jeremiah Evarts, Lydia Child, Lois Stalvey, and others, White educators can arm themselves with allies who have spoken out against oppression and dared to “swim against the tide of cultural and institutional racism” (Tatum, 2003, p. 109).

I’m Here, But They Won’t Teach Me

Teacher Biases

Although much reform has taken place in education throughout the years, African Americans still lag significantly behind their White peers in areas of graduation, college attendance, academic achievement, and representation in gifted and AP courses, while a disturbing number of African Americans are represented in the special education programs (Whiting, 2009, p. 224). What roles do teachers play in these statistics? Teachers are most often the primary source of recommendation for students into the gifted program. Unfortunately, most classroom teachers do not have any training in the gifted identification process, and as such, often overlook potential students who are gifted. Ford (1998) cited several studies conducted concerning the identification process for gifted students and found that “half the states require no certification or endorsement in gifted education.” How can teachers be allocated the responsibility for recognizing gifted traits in their students if they are not trained? According to Davis and Rimm (2004), “For minority and poor children, the teacher nomination method creates special hazards” (p. 281). Who is best qualified to identify students as gifted has been a hotly contested topic (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheish, & Holloway, 2005).

Ford and Whiting (2008) asserted that although the minority student population in public schools has increased to 43%, “We are not witnessing much change in teacher

diversity; slightly over 8 in 10 teachers are White.” This poses a problem because the majority of teachers are middle-class, White females who have little to no knowledge of the students they serve.

The Eyes of the Owner Fatten the Horse-A Spanish Proverb

I am reminded of my son Isaiah’s fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Cunningham, who early in the school year wondered aloud to me how he could possibly be gifted. Her reasoning was that although he was extremely bright, his latest standardized test scores were off the charts; she just did not see the characteristics that she thought embodied giftedness. She pointed out that when he was assigned class work he often asked to work with a partner, required much prodding when doing independent work at the computer, was very loud and boisterous when interacting with his peers, and frequently was out of his chair. She wondered if he was hyperactive.

She was truly puzzled. Her bewilderment left me baffled. I had taught all of these same students, including Isaiah, the year before in third grade. This same group of kids had been together since Pre-K, and I had come to know many of them; not only through being their teacher but also as a parent through outside activities such as summer camps, birthday parties, and recreation sports in the county. There were a total of 68 students in the fourth grade. Eleven students were served in the gifted program, which consisted of the pull-out version of placement. Students were pulled out of class one day a week for a full day of classes with the certified gifted teacher. Of the 11 gifted students, nine were White. Isaiah was one of two Black students; he being the only male. The teacher’s reluctance to see Isaiah as gifted prompted me to confer casually with his other teachers

who assured me Isaiah was indeed gifted, was working up to his potential, and not a behavior problem. Ford et al. (2008b) asserted,

Few teachers have formal preparation in gifted education, leading us to question the extent to which teachers understand giftedness, are familiar with characteristics and need of gifted students, are effective in referring students for gifted education screening and placement, and whether they can teach and challenge such students once placed. (p. 300).

I concluded that this particular teacher because she was a novice, most likely assumed that because Isaiah was a bit more active in class than his gifted peers; she just misread him and his abilities. In his book, *Keeping Black Boys Out of Special Education*, Kunjufu (2005) asserted that many Black boys display characteristics of giftedness, but their gifted characteristics are interpreted frequently by educators as behavioral issues that may need special education intervention. The most frequently mentioned characteristics are:

1. Keen power of observation
2. Sense of the significant
3. Willingness to examine the unusual
4. Questioning attitude
5. Intellectual curiosity
6. Inquisitive mind
7. Creativeness and inventiveness
8. High energy levels
9. Need for freedom of movement

10. Versatility
11. Diversity of interests and abilities
12. Varied hobbies. (Kunjufu, 2005, p. 4).

Kunjufu (2005) concluded that when Black children demonstrate one or several of these characteristics in the classroom, they are often perceived as behavior problems. I promised myself I would not jump to conclusions and would maintain a professional distance between myself and Mrs. Cunningham. I did not want to be perceived as an overprotective, neurotic, or nagging parent. Nor did I want to come across as the all-knowing veteran teacher.

There were, however, a few times when I had to ask for clarification about an assignment. One particular time was when the class had been given a list of 20 words, which they were to classify and sort, using a graphic organizer called a Tree Map. The Tree Map was part of a county-wide teaching tool that all teachers and students were expected to use throughout the year. Isaiah had been using this graphic organizer since first grade, and we were both well acquainted with it as a learning strategy.

This assignment was to be a weekly homework assignment for his spelling grade. Isaiah completed the assignment, and I looked over it, and made a few suggestions. Isaiah corrected the assignment and turned in on Friday. He completed the assignment for the following week in the same manner. Two weeks later, when he brought his papers home to be signed and returned, I was stunned to see that Isaiah had received a failing grade on both assignments. Across each paper, in huge red print were the words, “Did Not Follow Directions.” I rummaged through Isaiah’s book bag and located the assignment. I could not understand what we did wrong. Since this was to be a weekly assignment and he

failed it twice already, I realized I had to find out what we did wrong. I emailed Mrs. Cunningham that same night and asked if I could come by and speak to the next day after school.

The next day, with the assignments in hand, I sat down in front of Mrs. Cunningham desk and asked what was wrong with the assignment. She informed me that the words should have been classified according to parts of speech; nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. I explained that since the vocabulary words consisted of science, math, social studies, and words from his reading story that is how we classified them. I then pulled out the assignment directions and looked for the verbiage that stipulated the classification was to be done according to parts of speech. It was not there. When I pointed out to her that those specific directions were not included in the assignment Mrs. Cunningham responded, “Oh, I told them that verbally.”

I asked if Isaiah had been the only student who had misunderstood the assignment and she replied that several other students had made the same mistake. I inquired as to what her plan was to address this miscommunication and could Isaiah possibly redo the assignments. She informed me that since I now knew the assignment requirement (classifying words according to parts of speech), the problem was resolved and yes, Isaiah could redo the assignments and bring his grade up to a 70% rather than the 50% he had received.

I couldn't help but to think of the other students who had failed the assignment because the directions were not explicitly stated. She informed me that if their parents complained, they too would be allowed to redo the assignments. So, in other words, children whose parents were unable to navigate through the maze of requirements for

their children to be successful were at this teacher's mercy. Mrs. Cunningham had washed her hands of the responsibility of her students' success or failure in her classroom.

Gibbs (1984) posited six major social primary factors that inhibit school success among Black youth. In his study he concluded, "Lack of communication between parents and school authorities...contributes to student alienation" (Gibbs, 1984, p. 7). Withholding pertinent information from students such as requirements for the completion of an assignment is tantamount to setting them up for failure. As I was leaving the classroom, Mrs. Cunningham stood up and with a long sigh said, "I expect a lot more from Isaiah, especially since he is in the gifted program." I assured her I also had high expectations for him as well, but I also have to remind myself he is only 10 years old and just because he is gifted did not mean he was perfect. I left the conference and returned to my room pensive. I wondered to myself if there was something more going on than just what was on the surface. I realized that if she treated Isaiah, who was the child of a co-worker in her building, so callously, how did she treat other people's children?

Three weeks later, Isaiah received another failing grade on a different homework assignment. The assignment was to create a word search, using his vocabulary words. Students would write the vocabulary words backwards, forwards, horizontally, vertically, and diagonally in a grid type of paper. They would then circle the words with a colored pencil so the words could be identified readily by the teacher. The directions were simple and clear cut; however Isaiah received a 50% on the assignment. This time, I stopped by after school with the assignment in my hand to ask what Isaiah had done incorrectly. Mrs. Cunningham informed me that although Isaiah had done most of the assignment

correctly, he did not include a word bank. “Have you ever seen a word search without a word bank”, she asked me. Her attitude and tone was very condescending. Again, I pulled out the assignment directions, and it did not specify a word bank had to be included. I explained that it didn’t seem fair to me that she was keeping portions of the directions hidden from the children and then penalizing them when they did not complete the assignment as expected. She conceded, reluctantly, that perhaps I had a point, and she would rewrite all the directions for the weekly vocabulary assignments. She also allowed Isaiah to resubmit his assignment for a new grade of 70%.

Before I left her classroom, she told me not to worry too much about Isaiah’s grade, he currently had an 81% and that was good enough. I responded by informing her that an 81% was not good enough for Isaiah when I knew he was capable of doing better. Her complacency towards Isaiah’s work, and her expectations troubled me greatly.

At this point I would like to explain the meaning of the Spanish Proverb, *The eyes of the owner fatten the horse*. I came across this quote while reading Janice Hale’s (2001) book, *Learning While Black; Creating Educational Excellence for African American Children*. Hale described the frustration she felt in dealing with her son’s teachers in an exclusive private school. Her description of how she had to challenge repeatedly the lack of equity extended to her son, echoed my own feelings of futility and wonderment if Isaiah could indeed be successfully educated. Her sentiments about the injustices her son faced in the classroom echoed my own.

As a mother, I have been appalled by the extent to which members of the helping professions have functioned in an adversarial or competitive mode with me in raising my child, when really we should have been functioning in a partnership. I

have been made keenly aware that I am the *owner* of my child, and that he will develop and flourish (become fattened) only if I take responsibility for his development (by keeping my eyes on him); it is us against the world. This is not the way it should be. (Hale, p. 53)

As the weeks progressed, I watched with dismay my son's confident, bubbly personality turn inward to one of moodiness, reluctance to attend school, and low self-esteem. The incident that really sent me reeling was when Isaiah had not been allowed to visit the Media Center for over six weeks due to a behavior problem. Students are allowed to visit the Media Center with a teacher's permission during homeroom at the beginning of the day. On this particular day, in early October, Isaiah and several classmates visited the Media Center to exchange their Accelerated Reading books.

Accelerated Reading is a reading program in which students read a book, take a computer test on their comprehension about the book, and receive points. The points are then exchanged for rewards. When students receive a certain number of points, they are allowed to write their name on the Accelerated Reading Wall inside the main lobby of the school. It is a very big deal and the competition is fierce among the older grade level students. The ultimate goal is to get 250 points and be the top reader in the entire school. Isaiah missed the cut off in third grade by about 30 points and was determined to get the top prize in fourth grade.

While in the Media Center, Isaiah and a classmate were horsing around which came to the attention of the Media Center Specialist. Isaiah was sent back to his class without a book, and Mrs. Cunningham wrote him up. The action taken by the Principal is written verbatim below.

Isolation in the office for 30 minutes. Next time he goes to the library he needs an adult chaperone. He will show her he can make correct choices. Isaiah and I discussed how his poor choice started a chain reaction. His teacher needs to know she can trust him to get a book.

I was of course disappointed with Isaiah's behavior. I did not, however, have any heartache over the punishment, didn't think it was overly harsh. I did however, think that Mrs. Cunningham overreacted with her decision to write him up formally and send him to the office. In my opinion, it was a minor incident, one that she could have handled herself. This punishment would not interfere with his access to reading material because we frequently visited the local Barnes and Nobles store. I just assumed Mrs. Cunningham would watch over him the next time she took the class to the Media Center, and he would be able to return to the Media Center on his own once he had redeemed himself. I was wrong.

Several weeks went by, and I noticed in the evenings when we would pull out Isaiah's materials for homework, he had the same picture book in his book bag. When I questioned him about it, he would tell me he couldn't get to the Media Center. I didn't worry too much, because we were buying books from the book store and he had several books on his shelf still waiting to be read. Occasionally, I would tell Isaiah we could go to the Media Center together after bus call and pick out a book, but he declined the offer.

In early December, the Media Center Specialist stopped me in the hallway to tell me Isaiah had an overdue book. She was conducting a mini inventory before the winter break. She gave me the title of the book and I recognized it as the picture book I had seen in his book bag. I then asked her how Isaiah's behavior in the Media Center had been

since he had gotten run out for misbehaving. She looked at me, tilted her head, and said, “He hasn’t been back since that day.” I said she must have been mistaken. In any case, I assured her the book would be returned tomorrow. When I relayed this conversation to Isaiah on the way home in the car, he confirmed to me that he had not been back to the Media Center since October.

“Mrs. Cunningham told me I am not allowed to go into the Media Center unless she is with me,” he said.

“But, don’t you all go to the Media Center together as a class?” I asked him.

“No, she takes the class on Thursdays, and I’m in my gifted class on Thursdays. When I ask her to take me on the other days or during homeroom she says no, ‘cause she’s too busy and if she catches me in the Media Center without her, she’ll write me up.”

Now it all made sense to me; the same picture book in the book bag for weeks, the overdue book, his reluctance to go to the Media Center with me afterschool during bus call. When I got home, I read over the discipline write-up that described his punishment and noted that the date was October 10th and we were in the second week of December. It had been 10 weeks since Isaiah had been able to check out a book. My hands were trembling as I contemplated my options. I decided I needed to have a parent-teacher conference with an administrator present. I knew this would put my boss in a difficult situation- in the crosshairs between two teachers, one the parent of the other’s student. But I felt that I had no recourse.

The conference was scheduled, and both my husband and I, along with Mrs. Cunningham, and the principal were present. During the conference, I expressed my

dissatisfaction with how the punishment was carried out concerning Isaiah's Media Center privileges. I pointed out that he had not been allowed to exchange his books for 10 weeks. I thought that was overly punitive. I also pointed out other examples of overly harsh consequences, and what I believed were examples of indifference to Isaiah being successful in her class. The administrator asked Mrs. Cunningham was she aware that Isaiah was in his gifted class during the day when she took her class to the Media Center. Her answer stunned all of us.

"I chose Thursday, Mrs. Cunningham relayed, because all the gifted kids are gone, and I have fewer students to watch over." I was incredulous.

"But don't you see, I implored, how this excludes the gifted kids? When are they able to exchange their books?"

To my horror, Mrs. Cunningham informed me Isaiah was the only one it affected because the other kids could visit the Media Center during homeroom any day of the week. It was almost as if Mrs. Cunningham purposefully had concocted a plan to keep Isaiah from being academically successful. Mrs. Cunningham then went on to explain that she knew Isaiah had access to books and after he stopped asking to go to the Media Center, she must have just forgotten about it.

The principal informed Mrs. Cunningham that was not satisfactory and advised Mrs. Cunningham to choose another day to visit the Media Center, one in which all her students would be present. She also asserted that Isaiah would be allowed to return to the Media Center effective immediately.

The Trouble with Black Boys

As my husband and I left the meeting, we were buoyed by the principal's position but were extremely worried about the remainder of the year. Aside from her perception that Isaiah did not seem gifted, Mrs. Cunningham's cavalier attitude and indifference towards Isaiah was the most disturbing of all. He had not been a huge behavior problem in her class. His homework and class work were not an issue. He rarely missed school. He was an Honor Roll student and a teacher pleaser. What was the problem, I wondered.

Compared to most of the boys in his class, Isaiah was not any taller or bigger built, in fact he was one of smaller boys. He was not aggressive and Mrs. Cunningham confirmed for us during the conference that he was respectful and did not challenge her authority. He did not fit the description of the typical "fourth-grade syndrome" Black boy as described by Kunjufu (2005) in his book, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. Kunjufu asserted that many Black boys beginning at the age of nine, are no longer considered cute, but rather viewed as "rough-rugged and aggressive" (p. 46).

Noguera (2008) in his book, *The Trouble with Black Boys*, posited that often times, Black boys in the fourth grade begin to take on the look of young Black men. Mrs. Cunningham, like most of the teaching cadre, is a White woman; therefore, I can only surmise that perhaps she felt threatened by Isaiah, even though her description of Isaiah's behavior did not seem menacing.

It is likely Mrs. Cunningham bought in to the stereotype so many educators have of Black children, in particular, Black males. The media has done an excellent job of portraying African Americans as criminals, deviants, and socially maladjusted. "The images and stereotypes of Black males that permeate American society compel all Black

men and boys to contend with characterizations and images that are propagated in the media and with the perceptions that lurk within imaginations” (Noguera, 2008, xii). A co-worker, Donna, shared with me how her own children were affected by the pervasive negative images perpetuated by the media about Blacks in general, and specifically Black boys.

My husband is in the Army. We have moved around a lot and my children have had lots of new experiences. Up until Pennsylvania, we were never anywhere longer than 2½ years. My husband was able to switch jobs there and was there for six years. We lived in a “White bread” community. It was predominately White Catholics and White Jews. There were White Russian Jews, and former Soviet country Jews and some Asians. I think there was only one Black student at the elementary school. The area was so White, that when I saw a Black person in the grocery store, it was all I could do not to stare and ask where he/she came from. It was very different from anywhere else I had been. I was very excited about moving back to Georgia. One, my family all lives in Georgia. Two, I wanted to be out of the “White bread” community.

One day, I was talking to my kids about their new schools. They were going into 6th and 9th grades. I said that it will be nice to be in a school with all kinds of people of all color. We were chatting about the differences, being nervous, making new friends, etc. My 9th grader said he was scared to go to school with Black people. In my head, I was thinking, “WHAT?! THAT’S NOT HOW WE RAISED YOU!!” But I stayed calm and asked why he would be scared of Black people. He said because they are rappers and do drugs and other bad stuff. Where did he get that? I asked. He said from TV on shows and movies. His younger brother agreed with him, he was also scared.

My older son surprised me the most because his two best friends in Pennsylvania are Mexican and Chinese. But again, there were no Black people. I told him that not all Black people were like that. Black people are like White people, some are good and some are bad. I was very upset that they thought that way. However, I understood. Over the years I had numerous people say negative things about the south where I grew up. All they knew was what they saw on TV. We talked a lot about stereotyping and how that can be dangerous.

I believe I alleviated their fears some. I’m not sure about all of them. But today, they have friends of many cultures and ethnicities. They have learned and matured.

Donna's story particularly is informative because her son's fear of Black youth parallels that of many White teachers. "Teachers' assumptions about minority students and their families are shaped or reinforced by the portrayals of minorities in the evening news (as criminals), in legislative and political debates" (Fernandez, 2002, p.58). In a research study of pre-service teachers, Picower (2009) interviewed White female teacher candidates to reveal their life experiences towards students of color. Of the eight participants, nearly all of their narratives described their fearfulness of Black people.

If I'm walking home and there is a big group of Black guys walking towards me – I'm probably going to cross the street. I don't know if it's the same if it was a group of White guys. Like it would depend on their attitudes and things like how they are dressed. Some of the boys are tough! And that's scary for me. I'm scared that a fight would break out in class I guess...like either they would come at me, or that I couldn't stop it. I mean I'm a small person and like I'm in third grade classroom and some of the boys are the same height as me. It's intimidating (Picower, 2009, p. 203)

This participant's construction of Black boys as a child is particularly salient because she will continue to see Black boys in this same negative manner as their teacher. It is imperative that teachers challenge the assumptions and biases they hold towards their Black students. Too often, we "adopt attitudes and postures that are unsupportive and even hostile toward the boys we serve" (Noguera, 2008, xxi). Mrs. Cunningham's reluctance to see Isaiah as gifted caused her to look at him through the lens of deficit. She used the characteristics of her White students to measure Isaiah's giftedness. Mrs. Cunningham was unable to reconcile Isaiah, a Black male, with her own distorted

perspective of giftedness because academic success and giftedness is often associated with the dominant culture. Whiting (2009) stated, “Stereotypes about Black males inhibit teachers and other educators from seeing strengths in these students” (p. 226).

Mrs. Cunningham’s bias towards Isaiah’s ability, her complacency to except his low grades, and even his worthiness of her attention, manifested itself in her indifference to him and overly harsh and punitive consequences. Many teachers, White and Black alike, have great difficulty in seeing the potential of Black youth; in particular, Black boys whom they deem not to fit their prescribed description of gifted. Noguera (2008) described how teachers’ inaccurate assumptions and labeling can prevent these students from actualizing their potential.

The trouble with Black boys is that too often they are assumed to be at risk because they are too aggressive, too loud, too violent, too dumb, too hard to control, too streetwise, and too focused on sports. The trouble with Black boys is that most never have a chance to be thought of as potentially smart and talented or to demonstrate talents in science, music, or literature. The trouble with Black boys is that too often they are placed in schools where their needs for nurturing, support, and loving discipline are not met. (p. xxi).

Lack of diversity in the teaching cadre is not the only factor that inhibits teacher referrals of African American students for the gifted programs; however, one has to wonder if the dominant teaching force of White middle class female teachers can relate culturally to a population of students who markedly are different from themselves. Ford et al. (2002) argued that many teachers operate from a deficit model of thinking when evaluating African American students. Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) added that deficit

thinking focuses on students' weaknesses. It is the belief that ethnic minority groups are in some way genetically or culturally inferior to Whites."

Many teachers do not have any formal training in identifying the characteristics of giftedness; therefore many "teachers develop their own conceptions of giftedness and tend to identify students who fit these conceptions" (Pierce, Adams, Speirs, Cassady, Dixon, & Cross, 2007, p. 2). The consequence of such an uninformed approach is that these teachers are unable to recognize gifted students who differ in "learning styles and behaviors as compared to those typically found in the dominant culture" (Pierce et al, 2007, p. 3). Educators who use the deficit approach to viewing divergent cultures prevent themselves from capitalizing on the strengths because they see the differences as negatives. Irvine (1990) described this phenomenon as a "lack of cultural synchronization" (p. 27).

Hale (1986) asserted that Black children are not evaluated using their own culture as a barometer, but rather held up against White children who "are considered by psychologists to represent the norm" (p. 179). These norms are then used to disproportionately disqualify Black children from gifted services.

A study of teacher nominations for the gifted program in Georgia revealed a significantly higher accuracy rate for Asian and White students than for Black students (McBee, 2006). Results from this study suggested, "The low rate of teacher nomination could indicate racism, classism, or cultural ignorance on the part of teachers" (p. 109). Teachers are the *de facto* gatekeepers of the gifted programs, and as such, wield much power in determining who gets in and who does not get into these programs. Neilhart (2006) explained, "Hidden assumptions regarding class, identity, and achievement may

continue to negatively affect large numbers of talented youth unless deliberate efforts are made to reconcile the conflicts” (p. 201). Teacher biases concerning minority students play an integral role in the nominating process for the gifted program. Teachers, although susceptible to human frailties, must diligently distance themselves from prejudicial stereotypes concerning minority students, in particular Black males. Administrators and teacher preparation programs must include training on incorporating a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Since 1972, the population of minority children in the public school system has expanded from 22% to 43% (Ford & Whiting, 2008, p.104), while the White student enrollment has decreased from 78% to 57%. As of 2006, the total number of students enrolled in gifted and talented programs in elementary and secondary public schools in the United States was 3,236,990. The total number of gifted White students served in 2006 was 2,191,210, while the number of gifted Black students served in the same year was 296,150 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). Other gifted minority students (Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American/ Alaskan Natives) total 749,640.

As the population of our country moves forward and becomes more diverse, so too does our school population. However, the number of minority students served in the gifted programs across our nation does not reflect this new surge of pluralism. In a study conducted by the Office of Civil Rights (2002), it was found that White students comprised 59.50% of the total public school population in Grades K-12 and represented 72.59% of the gifted and talented programs. Black students’ total public school enrollment in Grades K-12 of the same year was 17.30%, and their representation in the

gifted and talented programs was 8.43%. Even when other minority groups are calculated into the equation, the numbers still do not add up to the White population. With Asian/Pacific Islander students comprising 7.64%, Hispanic/Latino students, 10.41%, and American Indian/Alaskan American students comprising 0.93%, the number of minority students served in the gifted programs during the year 2002 totaled a dismal 27.41%, yet they comprised 40.5% of the total student population in public schools in Grades K-12. In her study of gifted students in Georgia, McBee (2006) concluded,

Even if teachers are effective at nominating students from middle-class majority-cultural background, as some more contemporary research suggests, a significant question remains regarding their ability to detect students with high academic potential who come from other backgrounds, especially those backgrounds that are unrepresented in the program for gifted students” (p. 104).

Deficit Thinking

In addition to inadequate training in recognizing gifted attributes in Black students, teachers of divergent populations also must grapple with deficit thinking in regards to their minority students. Ford (2010) explained deficit thinking as, “The belief that culturally different students are genetically and culturally inferior to White students” (p. 32). The values, practices and traditions of the divergent culture are juxtaposed against that of the dominant middle class White standard; therefore, deficit thinkers judge the culturally different to be unacceptable. With their publication of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994) Herrnstein and Murray promoted their nefarious theory based on intelligence tests results that Black children are inherently inferior to White and Asian children.

The difference in test scores between African-American and European-Americans as measured in dozens of reputable studies has converged on approximately a one standard deviation difference for several decades. Translated into centiles, this means that the average white person tests higher than about 84% of the population of blacks and that the average black person test higher than about 16% of the population of whites. (p. 269)

Armed with this data, charts and graphs, teachers in my school district and in neighboring counties were provided staff development by earnest consultants to explain the achievement gap between Black and White students and perhaps also to assuage educators from feeling responsible for the failure of their Black students. Shortly after the training, my school transitioned from a heterogeneously based classroom format to ability grouped one. Students were placed in homogeneously based classrooms. Students' scores from national and state standardized tests were used to determine which students would be placed in above average, average, and below average classes. Students were only grouped for two academic subjects; reading and math, and there was some flexibility in moving students from one group to another based on performance. Many of the below average classes were filled with an overwhelming higher number of Black students, while the average and above average classrooms were mostly White. This practice continues in schools across the nation.

Elementary and secondary schools have been able to avoid lawsuits and parental scrutiny because this method of segregating children based on race and culture is no longer called tracking but instead, ability grouping, and is only conducted for a short duration of the school day, and not the complete day as it was in the latter part of the 21st

century. It is simply, a new twist on an old technique. The authors, Kretovics, and Nussel (1994) in their book, *Transforming Urban Education* asserted, “At the highest levels of educational policy, we have moved from deficiency theory to theories of difference, back to deficiency theory” (p. x). Grouping children according to ability is very similar to how our economic system is set up.

In his book, *Black Students, Middle Class Teachers*, Jawanza Kunjufu (2002) made the point that our *de facto* tracking philosophy is indicative of how our society is set up, adding, “The mission of American schools is to mirror capitalism and produce winners and losers” (p. 11). The manner in which students are leveled, sorted, and segregated according to ability creates a ready-made class structure for them to move into as adults, thus ensuring a caste system that for many will be permanent.

In 2014, my local newspaper heralded the story of a 68-year old Black woman who graduated from high school. On the front page of the newspaper, Mrs. Jackson, the mother of seven children and 13 grandchildren is seen receiving a standing ovation at the graduation ceremony. Several days later, an editorial was written about Mrs. Jackson, extolling her motivation and spunk to finish and attain her diploma. The article described how she pulled herself up by her bootstraps and did not let anyone or anything stand in her way of realizing her dream- that of being a high school graduate. As I gazed down on her face, I observed tears, some welling up in her eyes, while others are streaming down her creased cheeks. Her family members, some also crying, surround her; one small child can be seen hugging her neck, while the others gazed upon her with what I can only surmise, love and respect. It is a tender and wondrous moment for them.

But then I began to wonder, why did she have to wait 50 years in order to graduate? What circumstances prevented her from attending school? What resources and opportunities did she not have? What policies and programs were or were not in place when she made the decision to drop out of school? Is not our country the land of opportunity? Did Mrs. Jackson simply turn her back on opportunity?

Mike Rose, the author of *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us* (2009) reminded us that although the United States is seen as the great country of opportunity, a land in which dreams are realized, the opportunities needed to become part of mainstream society are not of individual making. Rose added, “Opportunity is determined by public attitudes and public policy” (p. 5). This belief flies in the face of conservatives who decry social programs to uplift the disenfranchised. They want us to believe that personal and professional achievement is solely in the hand of the individual; that all one has to do is be persistent, motivated, and self-reliant.

In praising Mrs. Jackson, the newspaper cited the infamous phrase, “That you can take control of your life and pick yourself [up] off the floor . . . it’s never too late to reclaim yourself” (*Augusta Chronicle*, 2011, p. 8). The editorial failed to mention that Mrs. Jackson was attending school during the Jim Crow era. Nor did it mention that during this time frame, Black students often dropped in and out of school to follow the crops to help the family survive. Rather, the writer would have us to believe that Mrs. Jackson finally got her priorities in order, or perhaps she was not educable. Rose (2009) warned, “But education alone is not enough to trump some social barriers like racist hiring practices or inequality in pay based on gender” (p. 13). Opportunity, resources, and social programs for people of color were minimal, at best, during this era. Mrs. Jackson

contemplated school. As I explore and observe my co-workers, the policies and programs that are in place, and my Black students, I wonder to myself, have things changed much, or are things much the same?

Educators who buy into the deficit thinking model are less apt to recommend students for gifted testing or AP classes in high school. They can and do in essence, “Abdicate any responsibility for minority students’ lower test scores because of the belief that genetics exclusively or primarily determine intelligence and that intelligence is static” (Ford & Harmon, 2001, p.143).

You’re Really Not That Smart - The Seed of Self-Doubt

Students who have teachers with low expectations of them and are viewed through a deficit lens often accurately internalize their teachers’ presumptions. A small percentage perseveres and achieves; however, many unfortunately, internalize their teachers’ dismal outlook and become complicit in their academic success. The dilemma for gifted Black students is how best to negotiate the quagmire of teachers expectations, while navigating their own potential to achieve. For Black students, attaining school success is difficult, especially when they have to contend with other social barriers such as covert racism, institutional racism, “peer pressure, low family involvement; and environmental barriers, such as poverty and low socioeconomic status” (Ford, 2011, p. 4). Gifted Black students are adept at recognizing the incongruence between their own lives and the reality of the schoolhouse experiences. They have a heightened sense of social injustice; therefore, “They grow critical and wary of the meritocratic ideology promoted in schools, and they are cognizant of race, class, and gender prejudice and

discrimination in school” (Ford, 2011, p. 9). Too often, these experiences cause Black students to question their own ability and whether or not school is for them.

As a fifth grader, my son Isaiah’s Social Studies teacher, Mrs. Youngblood, expressed great disbelief when he attained the highest score in the entire fifth grade on a benchmark test. A benchmark test covers all the material taught in a nine week grading period. In order to prepare the students for the evaluation, she had created several power points that resembled the game Jeopardy on television, in addition to a study guide. Students worked in groups to complete the study guide and Mrs. Youngblood would verify their answers at the end of class to ensure their answers were correct. Isaiah and I would diligently review his study guide each night. The grade for this benchmark counted as 20% of his final grade.

At the end of each school day, Isaiah’s daily routine was to come to my room. We would go through his Agenda Book and preview his homework assignments. He would get a snack and then head over to the After-School Program. On this particular day, I noticed that his social studies study guide had not been filled in. He reminded me that he had been in his gifted classes all day and was not present for the review. Since students were not issued their own textbook, I sent him to Mrs. Youngblood to get one so we could complete the study guide together. We continued to study over the weekend and Isaiah took the test the following week.

A week or so later, at the end of a school day, Isaiah came to my room, as usual, before heading out to the After-School Program. As we went through his homework assignments, I came across his social studies benchmark test. I was elated to see that he had a perfect score, plus an extra 10 points for answering the bonus question correctly. I

congratulated him on his hard work. Instead of sharing my elation, he scowled. I pressed him for an explanation. His answer still reverberates within me. When passing back the tests to the kids, Mrs. Youngblood made the comment to the class that Isaiah had made the highest score in the whole fifth grade.

“Well, what’s wrong with that,” I asked Isaiah, “That’s a great accomplishment; she was giving you a compliment.”

“No, Mama, you don’t understand. It’s the way she said it, like she couldn’t believe I could be that smart. She said she even had to check to make sure I didn’t cheat. Why would she say that?” The hurt in his voice was palpable.

“Oh, she must have been kidding, Baby. She knows how smart you are; you’ve had good grades all year long. You must have misunderstood.” I tried to soothe him. He shrugged his shoulders, and gave me a look that conveyed he didn’t really buy what I was saying. He got his snack, picked up his book bag and headed out the door. I too headed out the door to a faculty meeting. As I was approaching the door to the Media Center, Mrs. Youngblood was about to enter as well.

“Hey, Isaiah just showed me his test. A perfect score! I’m so thrilled! I can’t wait for his daddy to see it,” I gushed.

Mrs. Youngblood turned to me and with a puzzled look on her face answered, “Yeah, of all the kids in the fifth grade, I never expected Isaiah to be the one with the best score. I even double checked it. I’m really surprised.”

We both just stood there, looking at one another. I tilted my head to the side, and in a steady voice that did not betray the rage pulsating through my body, I asked, “Really, why is that?”

But before she could reply, someone behind us bellowed out, “Are you two planning on going inside any time soon?”

I quickly stepped into the Media Center, surveyed the room and scurried to a seat in the back, putting as much distance between Mrs. Youngblood and me as possible. I needed to decompress and think this all through. Why would Mrs. Youngblood be amazed that Isaiah could have a perfect score? What did her comment “Of all the kids in fifth grade, I never expected Isaiah to be the one with the best score” mean? What could she be missing I asked myself. I ticked off all the reasons why Isaiah did so well: We studied each night; we had a copy of the textbook; Isaiah was in the gifted program; she was a competent teacher; she reviewed for a week; she went through the trouble to create a fun Jeopardy game on the Smart Board for the kids to use to review; and she gave the kids a study guide, which they reviewed each day.

Again, I wondered, what was she missing? I replayed in my head what Isaiah had told me and juxtaposed this with what I had just heard from his teacher. Suddenly, hot tears sprung up in my eyes. I had dismissed Isaiah’s feelings as being foolish, when all along he had assessed Mrs. Youngblood accurately. Without explicitly articulating it, he had pinpointed the one discriminating factor; he was Black. He personally experienced for himself the doubt many teachers have of their Black students, in particular, Black boys. Isaiah was my canary.

Authors Guiner and Torres (2002) compared those Black students who experience racial marginalization to the canary the miners carried into the mines.

Miners often carried a canary into the mines alongside them. The canary’s more fragile respiratory system would cause it to collapse from noxious gases long

before humans were affected, thus alerting the miners to danger. The canary's distress signaled that it was time to get out of the mine because the air was becoming too poisonous to breathe. Those who are racially marginalized are like the miner's canary: their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. (p. 11)

Thompson (2004) explained, "Teachers' beliefs about African Americans and other students have far-reaching consequences" (p. 34). Isaiah is 16 years old and as he moves into adolescence; his self-esteem is contingent upon his ability to synthesize societies' expectations of him with his own expectations of himself and his true ability to excel in academia. He knows he is intellectually empowered; however his intelligence is constantly challenged. Ford (2011) asserted that negative feedback from educators can "demotivate Black students and wreak havoc on their desire to participate in a system perceived as unresponsive, unjust, and otherwise discriminatory" (p. 9).

In her book, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*, bell hooks (2003) posited that all Black students, regardless of their socioeconomic status and academic ability are susceptible to low self-esteem. This assault on Black youth's self-esteem does not lie solely at the feet of their educators, but also with the ingrained perception among their White and Black peers as well as from the media. For Black students the assault on their academic prowess and overall self-esteem effectively sets into motion "a journey into the abyss of self-doubt that stems from being set apart from other African-American students and from never being accepted fully by White students" (hooks, 2003, p. 16).

One example of Isaiah not being accepted fully by his White classmates occurred when he was in fourth grade. He along with Andrew and Daniel, both White classmates

in the same grade and both children of teachers in the building, were waiting to be picked up after an especially long faculty meeting. The After-School Program teacher had stepped out of the room to take a phone call, and the three boys and several younger kids were left in the Art room on their own.

Isaiah, Andrew, and Daniel were good friends. Isaiah and Andrew had been classmates since Pre-K, while Daniel arrived at the school while they were all in the fourth grade. All the boys enjoyed sports, reading, and all three were in the gifted program. On this day, their homework was completed; therefore, they were having fun on the computers. At one point, Isaiah burped very loudly. Daniel said, "Dude, you're gross!" A few minutes later Daniel passed gas. Isaiah laughed and said, "Dude, you're nasty, and you stink too!" Without missing a beat, Daniel retorted, "Well, I may stink, but at least I ain't Black!" Andrew, drawing in his breath, said to Daniel, "Now you've crossed the line." Before Isaiah could respond, the teacher walked into the room. According to Isaiah, the teacher told Daniel that his comment was inappropriate and he needed to apologize. Reluctantly, Daniel apologized, but in doing so, made the following comment, "I don't know what I'm saying sorry for, he's Black and I'm glad I'm not." According to Tatum (2003) Isaiah was facing an all too familiar "devalued status" (p. 58) that many Black youth, in particular, Black boys encounter. In Daniel's mind, the worst thing one could be was to be Black. For Isaiah, this incident caused him to ponder what does it mean to be Black?

To Be or Not To Be Black

As a preschool child growing up in a family in which everyone's complexion varied from the deep Ebony of his dad to my fair Irish coloring, Isaiah wasn't particularly

interested in the concept of color. As the youngest of five children, he lived in rather insulated environment. He attended a Christian childcare center with students from divergent ethnicities. We have attended the same predominantly Black church since he was born. He has spent holidays and family reunions with both his dad's side of the family as well as mine. Just as we did with his older sisters, we took great pains (and still do) to promote a positive awareness for both of his cultures. Having people of different colors around him was very natural for him.

It was during Kindergarten when Isaiah became cognizant of racial identity. Our first of many conversations about race occurred in the car on the way home from school. I buckled him up in his car seat and we headed home. Our usual routine included him telling me about his day, who he played with, what centers he may have gone to, and then we would sing along with his Veggie Tale tape. Because we lived nearly 50 miles from school, he would often fall asleep. As we were singing along with Larry the Cucumber, Isaiah asked me to stop the music. "Mama," he asked me seriously, "Will I be White when I get to Heaven?" I flipped the visor down in front of me and opened the mirror so I could see him as we spoke. I noticed his eyebrows were knitted together and he was straining against the straps of his car seat eagerly waiting for my answer. Stalling for time to think of an answer, I asked him, "Why do you want to be White?"

"Well, all my friends are White, and you're White, and Seth said I can't go to Heaven if I'm not White. I want to be White too!"

As simply as I could, I explained to Isaiah that Heaven was for all people, not just for people who looked like me or Seth, but for everyone, including him, his daddy, and his sisters. I reminded him of his Sunday school lessons and the song he had learned,

Jesus Loves the Little Children. I began to sing and he joined in. “Do you remember the picture you colored during that lesson? The picture of Jesus sitting on the grass with all the children gathered around him?” I asked. “Were they all the same color as Seth or I am?”

“No.” He answered quietly.

Then I asked, “And how about the picture of Jesus and the children hanging on the wall in your bedroom? Are all the kids in the picture the same color as Seth and I am?” I prodded gently.

I watched in the visor as he contemplated the question. “No, they look like me!” he squealed with an impish smile. Satisfied, he visibly relaxed back into his seat and asked for the tape to be turned on again.

I turned the Veggie Tale tape back on and we finished the ride home. As he sang along I reflected on the conversation. I knew that although Isaiah had couched the question in terms of his going to Heaven, the underlying issue was he wanted to know why he was different from his classmates, or perhaps why his friends made an issue of it. After all, seeing people of different colors was as natural to Isaiah as perhaps Seth’s seeing only his color. Beverly Tatum (2003) described a similar story about her oldest son Jonathan and his friend Eddie. Eddie informed Jonathan that the reason why Jonathan’s skin is brown is because he drinks too much chocolate milk. Tatum matter-of-factly explained to her son Jonathan that the reason why his skin is brown is because he has more melanin in his skin. She explained that melanin is very important because it protects his skin from the sun.

Tatum (2003) asserted that Jonathan's friend Eddie, like Isaiah's friend Seth, has at a very young age, "internalized Whiteness as the norm" (p. 35). At the age of five, Isaiah was already aware that being White was more advantageous to being Black. He too had "already started internalizing racist messages" (Tatum, 2003, p. 32).

Racial Disidentification

During the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954, the results of an experiment conducted by Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the early 1940s were introduced as evidence that the self-esteem and self-concept of Black children is tied integrally to how they view themselves as racial beings (Ford, 2011). The experiment, now known as the 'Doll Test' sought to discern how Black children internalized racism and its effect on their overall self-concept. Two dolls, one Black and one White, were presented to Black children. The examiners then asked the children to describe the smartest and the prettiest doll. Each time, the children selected the White doll as being the smartest, prettiest, and nicest. When asked to select the ugliest doll, the stupid doll, or the bad doll, the children chose the Black doll. From this test we can conclude that children as young as Kindergarten can and do internalize racial messages.

This same study was repeated (with a much smaller testing pool) in 2005 by Kerri Davis. Davis, a high school senior produced and broadcast her study, "A Girl Like Me," a short video documentary in which she replicated the Clarks' famous 'Doll Experiment.'. Sadly, Davis' results in 2005 were nearly identical to those of the original experiment conducted in the 1940s. Davis also interviewed various teenage girls in her school. "A number of issues surfaced concerning the standards of beauty imposed on Black girls and how this affects their self-image. I thought that by including this experiment (the Clarks'

Doll experiment) in my film, I would shed new light on how society affects Black children today and how little has actually changed” (Davis, K. 2006).

Davis, at the age of 17, along with her classmates articulated only too well how society can contribute to self-hate in sub cultures. The question begged to be answered is Ford (2011) stated, “How does racial identity influence the achievement and social relations of gifted Black students?” (p. 275). Racial identity is a pivotal factor in how gifted Black students navigate through school, with their peers, and the adults responsible for their education.

The issue of racial dis-identification among African Americans was first introduced in 1971 by William E. Cross, Jr. under the taxonomy of racial identity development (Ford & Harris, 1997). He later revised his model of racial identity in 1995 and again in 2001 with Vandiver (Rodgers, 2008). Their theory of Black identity development has three stages: preencounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. Within each stage are various identity types moving in progression from least to most developed type. They are: assimilation, miseducation, racial self-hatred, anti-White, intense Black involvement, nationalist, biculturalist, and multiculturalist.

Ford (1997, 1998, 2005, 2006), Bonner et al (2008), Whiting (2009), and Rodgers (2008) argued that the significance of self-concept plays an important role in student achievement. Ford and Harris (1997) stated,

The issue of race may be more salient for Blacks than Whites. For instance, White Americans are much less likely to experience the chronic stress and problems associated with racial identity because the color of their skin is not a barrier to success. (p. 106)

This statement rings true for countless gifted Black students. The constant chipping away at one's ability and worth can capitulate in self-hatred of oneself resulting in self-sabotaging behaviors in order to self-protect. I have been fortunate thus far in helping Isaiah to recognize and resist the "micro-aggressions that potentially remind Blacks that they may be viewed by other groups as inferior" (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007, p. 276). Sue et al. (2007) asserted:

Micro-aggressions occur in the pre-encounter stage. Micro-aggressions are insults and offenses aimed directly or indirectly at Blacks that challenge their innate abilities. A few examples include (a) being told you speak well, (b) having your academic credentials questioned, (c) being told by a teacher that you cheated on an assignment because it was so well done, and (d) being punished for an incident in which a White classmate was not. (p. 277)

Based on his extensive research, Ogbu (2003) concluded that while peer pressure is a huge component in the self-esteem development of all children, African American and Hispanic students however, seem particularly susceptible to negative opposition from their peers. It is this self-hatred, self-doubt, and self-loathing that propel many gifted Black students to denounce their giftedness in order to fit in with their peer groups. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) concluded that a major reason gifted Black students chose not to be successful in school or hide their giftedness was the fear of being accused of acting White.

Using Cross' conception of nigrescence, Ford and Harris (1997), Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005), and Whiting (2009) have conducted several studies to discern the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement. They concluded,

“students of color who have a low, poor, or negative racial identity are less likely to perform well academically than students of color who have a high or positive racial identity. Racial identity development (RID) is positively related to achievement among gifted students of color - individuals with high RIDs often have high achievement; students with low RIDs have low achievement” (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005, p. 172). Teachers who are not familiar with the influence of racial identity on achievement are less likely to promote a culturally responsive pedagogy in their classrooms, thereby exacerbating the cycle of low recruitment and retention of African American students in the gifted program. A byproduct of low racial identification among students of color is underachievement, frustration, and a feeling of invisibility.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Should race and culture be considered when implementing curriculum in our public schools? Teachers who refuse to acknowledge the race or culture of their students are participating in “dysconscious racism, an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 31). Teachers who foster a culturally responsive relationship with their students do not shrink from their students’ Otherness, but rather make a conscious effort to weave their students’ culture and ethnicity into their curriculum. Educators who do not take race into consideration when planning their curriculum console themselves that they are colorblind. This attitude, that one curriculum is suitable for all students, allows educators to retain their cultural superiority over their students, thus continuing the cycle of marginalization and oppression. “Race, Toni Morrison explained, has functioned as a

metaphor necessary to the construction of Americanness: in the creation of our national identity, American has been defined as White” (Takaki, 1993, p. 2).

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of a day when, “My four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King, Jr., 1963). King spoke these words to a nation embattled in a Civil Rights movement. Sadly, after a half century, most students of color continue to be evaluated by their skin tone, rather than by the rich and diverse culture they possess. Although African Americans make up a distinct racial group, Ladson-Billings (1994) explained, “The acknowledgment that this racial group has a distinct culture is still not recognized” (p. 9). Integrating a curriculum that encompasses a culturally congruent pedagogy promotes a feeling of validness among diverse students.

In regard to learning environments, teachers and counselors must create learning environments that are culturally responsive, rather than culturally neutral, culturally blind, or culturally assaultive. Culturally responsive classroom and schools capitalize on diverse students’ cultural backgrounds, traditions, learning styles, and communication styles. (Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005, p.63)

Most educators are White, middle class females; therefore they need not only to be cognizant of the Other in their classrooms, but also to be aware of their own culture and privileges they enjoy solely because of their class and race. In order to teach *just* behavior and democracy, teachers have to model the same for their students and provide plenty of opportunities to practice and apply just behavior and democracy. We, as educators, must be protagonists for change and acceptance.

Gay (2000) stated, “Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. She added, “It teaches to and through the strengths of these students” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Teachers who infuse their curriculum with culturally responsive pedagogy recognize that doing so empowers their students. When students experience their culture in the daily discussions, lessons, and teaching, they feel validated and liberated. Incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom allows everyone to have a voice. Culturally responsive pedagogy is democratic, thoughtful, humane, and decent. The classroom is the ideal environment to promote multicultural awareness and fuse relationships between cultures. Doing so ensures a cohesive society. Recognizing diverse cultures validates people and creates a harmonious classroom, which empowers citizens to interact with one another in a positive way as opposed to being fearful of one another because of differences.

How can educators ensure their classrooms are environments of equity, places where democracy is not just merely lectured about as an abstract concept, but embodied so that relationships with students are nurtured? Social Reconstructionism is a good beginning. William Pinar (2004) advocated public schools as an excellent tool to bring about social change and awareness (p. 29). Grant and Sleeter (2007) concurred with this view. They held that in order for educators to better serve their students, educators need to be in tuned with the diversity of their students, most especially those students of color and females (p. 72). Social Reconstructionism in the classroom makes use of teaching social justice, using ethics and the critiquing of social issues.

“If you can’t see that your own culture has its own set of interests, emotions, and biases, how can you expect to deal successfully with someone else’s culture” (Fadiman, 1997, p. 261). Incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom allows everyone to have a voice. “Multicultural education has an opportunity and a challenge to be counter-hegemonic. When issues such as racism, class privilege, and sexism are left silent in the classroom, the implicit message for students of color appears to be that the teacher and school do not acknowledge that experiences of oppression exist” (Erickson, 2007, p. 51). This attitude can lead to *marginalization* which can lead to resistance, which makes teaching for educators and learning for students more difficult to attain.

It is imperative that teachers recognize that inequalities do exist between the ruling class and minorities and make conscientious efforts to thwart the *status quo* that has long permeated curriculum in our classrooms. Diaz-Rico argued, “Developing strong background knowledge prepares diverse students to be strong, caring contributing community members in the cultures of the future” (Diaz-Rico, 2004, p. 291).

As we move towards a more multicultural society, the make – up of our schools is also changing. “By the year 2020, minorities will comprise about half of the children in our nation’s public schools” (Meyer & Rhoades, 2006, p. 83). Teachers who choose to incorporate these racial, cultural, and linguistic diversities will create students who not only value themselves, but value others as well. They will leave the classroom with not just an understanding of history from a European perspective, but one of pluralism that embraces all people. Helping students to value themselves and others strengthens their ability to interact with the diverse population they encounter when they leave the school house.

We Don't Need Those Books Here

Several years ago, the Superintendent of Curriculum for my school system applied for and received a grant to purchase a variety of books that highlighted divergent cultures. A mass email from the Superintendent was sent to every teacher in the system informing us of the windfall and encouraging us to utilize the books in our curriculum. I spend a small fortune every year on books for my classroom, so I was thrilled to hear the good news.

I waited expectantly for week after week for the media specialist to announce that the books would be ready to check out. No announcement was forthcoming and as the weeks turned into months; I forgot. Until, that is, one afternoon when I was poking around in the Teacher Resource Room, looking for a particular video to supplement a lesson. I stumbled upon several boxes stored under a table. I opened the first box and to my delight, I pulled out book-after-book that highlighted minority kids, Black poets, gay families, books about foster care children, children growing up with parents who are incarcerated, children being raised by grandparents, children who have drug addicted parents, as well as titles about multi-racial families. Teacher resource books were also included with many of the titles. The book titles included picture books and chapter books. I sat on the floor, pulling each book out and constructing in my head how I would incorporate them into my lessons.

As I placed the books back into the boxes, I began to wonder why they were there, and where did they come from? I blew the dust off the first box and read the delivery label. All the boxes were from the Superintendent. These were the books he told us about in the email, the books I had been waiting for and had forgotten about. But why

were they on the floor, still boxed up, under a table, covered in dust? Why hadn't the Media Specialist informed us about their arrival?

The next day I mentioned my *find* to the Media Specialist. "When will we be able to check them out?" I asked her. She hesitated for a long moment and replied with a hint of exasperation in her voice.

"I just don't know what to do with those books. They're not library bound books. I don't know what Dr. Osborne was thinking when he picked out those books. I'm gonna have to think about it."

I couldn't put my finger on it, but she seemed so disinterested in the conversation. As though somehow having received the books was a huge inconvenience to her.

"But you've had them a good little while already," I gently reminded her. "Can I have a few while you think about it?"

"Sure, help yourself," she answered with a sigh. And that is exactly what I did! I walked away with an armful of books. A week later, the media specialist sent an email to the faculty informing us of the books. She had decided that because they were not library bound, she could not put them on the shelves for check out. If we were interested, we could come and pick out what we wanted. First come, first serve. I was aghast that she placed so little importance on these books. Even though they were not library bound, she could have catalogued them and place them in the Teacher Resource Room for the faculty to use in their classrooms. The reason for writing the grant and giving each school their own collection of books about diverse cultures was to help teachers reach out and bridge the cultural gap. Smith (1955) wrote,

To grow good human beings is the people's business: a job that must be done in the home, at church, in school; goodness seeps into a child from the books he reads, the art he loves, his play, his talk, his dreams and ideals, his awareness of others and their needs. (Smith, 1955, p. 14)

Many school Media Centers are filled with an overabundance of books that portray the dominant culture group; however, minority kids often search fruitlessly for books that resemble themselves. The Media Specialist, a White, middle – class female, did not see the need for our students to have access to literature about multiracial, incarcerated, gay, or foster families. Her lack of awareness, deliberate or not, has the potential to short change both teachers and students alike. The media specialist did not value the cultural diversity of the student body, or the need for children to be exposed to books in which diverse cultures would be promoted; therefore apparently she assumed the entire faculty felt the same way. With the exception of two other teachers and I, no one questioned her email and reasoning for giving the books away unusual. The media specialist's indifference to the diversity of our school population and her dismal neglect of the need to recognize it in our curriculum, rendered many cultural groups invisible. This philosophy created an unbalanced atmosphere ripe for the perpetuation of hegemony.

Appiah (2007) suggested that it is not enough for teachers merely to teach about differences between cultures. "Teaching young people to respect those with other identities is not the same thing as teaching them some of the central practices and beliefs of a different subculture" (Appiah, 2007). Neither can teachers resort to the old school formula of talking about the contributions of Blacks during the month of February or

women's accomplishments during March. This type of watered-down curriculum further marginalizes minorities because the message sent to students is that this particular ethnic group only merits discussions once a year. "Validation of their culture would eliminate sentiments of inferiority.

Fox (2007) stated, "For members of ethnic minorities, culture plays a key role as a source of identity and as a way of organizing resistance to exclusion and discrimination" (p. 124). Teachers have to pursue actively increasing their own knowledge base about diverse cultures. Research has shown that teachers' multicultural knowledge or lack of knowledge has a direct impact upon "minority student's classroom success and that undervaluing the experiences of culturally different students can lead to poorer academic achievement" (Meyer & Rhoades, 2006, p. 85).

Banks (cited in Davis) implored teachers to locate accurate information that provide a "positive image of various racial and ethnic groups. He also suggested presenting this information in a variety of ways such as "films, plays, biographies, and novels" (Davis, R., 2007, p. 212). Culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education is important in "learning about, preparing for, and celebrating cultural diversity, or learning to be bicultural" (Gay, 1994, p. 21). As society is constantly increasing and changing, multiculturalism is taking on a new meaning. Different cultures are coming together in schools, the workplace, and neighborhoods to form bonds that develop lifelong friendships, partnerships, and communities. These racial, cultural, and linguistic diversities increase the importance of teaching children to live and work together responsibly. A goal for all educators should be to provide a sense of community

so that every student feels that they are a part of the classroom culture, that their culture is recognized and validated.

Teachers must safeguard against over-essentializing ethnic and minority groups and examine materials for prejudices and biases, both in the curriculum they present and discussions that take place between themselves and students. “Key biases to look for are: negative representations, overgeneralizations, stereotyping, omissions, superficial and insignificant changes, superior-inferior positions, ethnocentrism, minimization, and classism” (Ford & Harris, 1999, p. 72). Teachers cannot depend on textbook writers to present history accurately; they must take the initiative and conduct their own research in order to be culturally savvy.

The classroom provides a safe environment in which students can speak freely and share opinions, stories, and past experiences. It is in these autobiographies we share of ourselves which allows us to see one another through a different lens (Hansen, 2007). The phrase, *moral attentiveness* coined by Hansen, referred to the issue of incorporating a multicultural perspective in the classroom. He asserted that moral attentiveness is being “alert to the development of their students’ character” (Hansen, 2007, in Curren, p. 354). Reynolds echoes this sentiment when he spoke of his philosophy of compassion towards students. He advocated a “curriculum of compassion that focuses on matters of the heart” Reynolds (2003) stated, “It is a relationship among teacher, students, and the curriculum” (p. 47).

Ladson-Billings (1994) in her book, *The Dream Keepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* detailed numerous accounts of meaningful relationships she developed with her teachers over the course of her public school education. She

explained that it was the way and manner in which her teachers taught, not the curriculum, that fostered her healthy respect for herself and her culture. Ladson-Billings (1994) stated, “Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (p. 17).

Culturally relevant pedagogy allows students and teachers alike to examine stereotypes and misconceptions about themselves and others. “The social studies classroom provides a place where students, independent of where they have grown up, can create positive racial identities and learn the tools necessary to succeed as democratic citizens in a multicultural United States” (Davis, J., 2007, p. 210). Teachers who only teach the Eurocentric perspective do a disservice to their White students as well as their students of color. “Students of color need to encounter and experience a curriculum that highlights, showcases, and speaks from the point of view of the life experiences and contributions of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups, not just those of the White mainstream” (Milner, 2005, p. 392). Teachers should not view themselves as just mere interpreters or disseminators of history, but rather as “cultural brokers” (Fadiman, 1997, p. 95).

Much research is available to support incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom, so why then do so few educators make a commitment to do so? Many teachers are reluctant to incorporate divergent ethnic or culture studies into their daily curriculum for a variety of reasons. From my own personal observations, several of my co-workers are afraid of the repercussions they might incur if they delve too deeply in *hot button* issues such as race and historical misconceptions and omissions. Others just flat out don’t care and believe like Hirsch (1987) and Bloom (1987) that

promoting cultural diversity “is the undoing of our national identity” (Takaki, 1993, p. 3). They are among the many who advocate a “more homogeneous America” (Takaki, 1993, p. 4).

The most grievous reason teachers are reluctant to infuse their classroom teaching with culturally relevant pedagogy lays at the feet of our government in the passing of the NCLB Act, which provided little time for educators to tackle real world problems such as racism and other inequities their students face, nor did it allow for students to develop as critical thinkers. Educators are consumed with benchmark tests, CRCT scores, and making Adequate Yearly Progress. “Teachers have to do what they are told on what day and what time, teach to the tests (the standardized tests), teach books they have not chosen, and fear for their jobs if the test scores are not high enough (Morris, 2009, p. 187).

Au (1993) cautioned teachers that it is not enough to include content from divergent cultures in order to be culturally responsive, but to also enable them to feel at ease with their own cultural identities. Au (1003) stated, “Too often, students of diverse backgrounds find themselves in the position of having to choose between school success and their cultural identity” (Au, 1993, p. 13). During the mid-1970s in a study of how to raise the reading competency of Hawaiian children, Au and a team of researchers created a three-prong plan aimed towards improving the reading levels of Native Hawaiian ancestry. Most of the children were from families who were on welfare and resided in public housing.

The first leg of the plan was to implement the least amount of change, the second leg was to determine the children’s intellectual level, and the third component was to take

into consideration the cultural background of the students. In beginning of the research project, teachers and administrators were interviewed to inquire as to why they believed the children could or would not achieve. Students were described as lazy and unmotivated and parents as unhelpful. However, when parents were interviewed they “almost unanimously felt it most important for their children to graduate from high school and important for them to go to college as well (Au & Jordan, p. 140). In order to keep the students’ attention and to minimize classroom interruptions, the researchers trained “teachers in effective classroom management strategies. This innovation was successful in the sense that that it produced high rates of attending and industriousness on the part of the children” (p.142), Au and Jordan (1981) reported. However, the children’s reading levels did not increase.

The second leg of the research study involved assessing the children’s intelligence level. Students were assessed using the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence. The children tested after a year of kindergarten and nearly all scored almost 100 each. It was reasonable to assume then that the “children’s failure to learn to read, then, clearly cannot be attributed to any general intellectual deficit” (Au & Jordan, 1991, p. 142).

The third component of the research plan was implemented, that of incorporating the children’s culture into their curriculum. Researchers developed and implemented a hypothesis that Native Hawaiian children were not achieving grade-level reading comprehension due to “mismatches between the invisible culture of the home and the invisible culture of the school” (Au, 1993, p. 8). Using observations in the children’s homes, researchers discovered a speech pattern, “*talk story*, an important speech event for

Hawaiian children outside of school” (Au, 1993, p. 113). Within the Hawaiian culture, it is very common for one person to start a story and others to join in. In this manner, no one person has the monopoly on the discussion. This tradition, however, can cause chaos in a classroom with a teacher who is not culturally responsive. When teachers were trained to incorporate the Native Hawaiian culture of *talk story* into their reading lessons, the students were successful. Au and Jordan (1981) made the following observation,

Hawaiian children, like other minority culture children, are greatly handicapped in learning academic content, we suggest, because the school is ordinarily not adjusted to their ways of learning. As a result, the children appear to be much less competent in school than they appear in other settings. We think that one avenue of improvement is for the school to develop learning situations which are more congruent with those the child has experienced in his own culture. (p. 151)

Teachers do not hold a magic wand, which they can wave and be instantly afforded the right culturally responsive technique or strategy that allow them to relate to each culturally diverse student; however, as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) warned us, when we fail to recognize the culture of our students, when we fail to incorporate their learning styles in our everyday curriculum, who can we blame when they resist our authority, our narratives? Educators must be willing to break away from familiar beliefs and adjust their actions and teachings in order to create a more inclusive environment (Cummings, 1986).

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah, 29:27)

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a philosophy firmly rooted in the belief of changing the lives of oppressed groups of people. Founded by Jurgen Habermas in the early 1930s in Germany, Habermas, along with scholars, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer formed the Institute for Social Research, now known as the Frankfurt School. These scholars, according to Finlayson (2006), “challenged the widespread assumption of the time that the empirical approach of the natural sciences was the only valid one” (p. 3). The term *critical theory* is a lens which allows researchers to examine inequity as a function of capitalism. Schubert (2008) described critical theory as a means to “expose and overcome unjust social hierarchies derived from socioeconomic class, race, gender, sexuality, place, age, appearance, disability, and other hegemonic factors in society and school” (p. 404). In his book, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas & the Frankfurt School*, Guess (1981) outlined the underpinnings of critical theorists as:

1. Critical theories have special standing as guides for human action in that (a) they are aimed at producing enlightenment in the agents who hold them, (e.g., enabling those agents to determine what their true interest are), (b) they are inherently emancipators, (e.g., the free agents form a kind of coercion which is at last partly self-imposed, from self-frustration of conscious human action).
2. Critical theories have cognitive content, (e.g., they are forms of knowledge).

3. Critical theories differ epistemologically in an essential way from theories in the natural sciences. Critical theories are 'reflective'. (p. 2)

As a reflective theory, Kincheloe and McLaren (2008) asserted that critical theory is a theory that empowers individuals and groups alike. It is a theory of action in which injustices can be confronted. It is well known and widely accepted that Critical Theory, a philosophy committed to changing and improving the lives of oppressed people originated with the founders Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and Jurgen Habermas (Finlayson, 2006) in the early 1930s in Germany. These men used the theoretical perspectives of Marx, Hegel, Kant, and Weber (Ladson-Billings, 2000). As a vehicle to liberate oppressed groups, Rabaka (2007) explained, "Critical theory is deeply rooted in empirical and historical research, and its theoretical positions are linked to concrete social and political struggles" (p. 196).

What is not widely known, however, is that alongside the formation of the Frankfurt Institute, formally known as The Institute for Social Research, was another group of theorists that also sought to challenge the status quo. These theorists included W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Rabaka, 2007; Zuckerman, 2004). Both men worked tirelessly to challenge the "dominant Euro-American scholarly paradigm" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 403). DuBois, although most known for his discourse on race inequalities, spoke out against many forms of oppression to include sexism and class exploitation (Rabaka, 2007). DuBois argued, "The uplift of women, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, is our greatest modern cause" (DuBois, 1920, p. 105).

Kincheloe and McLaren (1998), while simultaneously challenging the “taken-for-granted empirical practices of American social science researchers” (p. 261), DuBois and his African American contemporaries would “remain invisible in the scholarly canon except as Negro intellectuals concerned with the Negro problem” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 403).

It is an easy jump, therefore, for most scholars to include DuBois and his colleagues in the Critical Race Theory camp. However, it should be noted that Critical race theorists, like the founders of the Critical theory movement resist “narrow psychological or biological explanations of human behavior, choosing instead to emphasize the enormous impact social institutions and historical circumstances have in shaping individual actions and beliefs” (Zuckerman, 2004, p. 7).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is comparable to critical theory because both critically assess the impact of societal injustices. Critical race theory’s primary objective, however, is to focus on “racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 398). The inclusion of critical race theory in my study enabled my participants and I to “define, expose, and address educational problems” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 7), while also providing an “understanding of how race and racism affect education and lives of the racially disenfranchised” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 8).

My decision to include critical race theory as my theoretical framework for this study was an easy choice. My topic was “intimately linked to my understanding of the political and personal stake I have in the education of Black children. All of my selves

are invested in this work: the self that is a researcher, the self that is a parent, and the self that is a community member” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 423).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) materialized in the latter years of the 1970s as the offspring of Critical Legal Studies (CLS). Several lawyers, including Derrick Bell and Allen Freeman, the founders of CRT, were displeased with how tedious and sluggish the legal cogs of justice were in pursuing “racial reform in the United States” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 11). CRT is “the radical legal movement that seeks to transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144).

CRT is a participatory theory in that it requires an analysis of systems of oppression and calls for action to transform these systems. Its emergence grew from discontent with the progress of the Civil Rights movement and laws, which were supposed to eliminate racism and establish “a race neutral way for distributing resources and opportunities (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999, p. 1-2. Bell, D. (2000) believed “the role of the civil-rights lawyer was not simply to deliver an interpretation of the legal rules, but to fashion arguments that might change existing laws” (Stovall, 2005, p. 201). Bluntly put, CRT theorists, while appreciating the focus and attention CLS brought to unjust laws in the United States, felt it did not bring “racism into its critique” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 12). It was out of this dissatisfaction that critical race theory was created. Critical race theory examines how economic inequities and educational inequities are a direct result of racism.

In addition to being dissatisfied with Critical Legal Studies’ slow process and lack of practice in action towards racial inadequacies, critical race theorists were not pleased with the Civil Right Movement, in particular, the ruling of the Supreme Court in the

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted this court case as the catalyst that caused the split between the organizations. They argued, “We recognize some serious shortcomings in that strategy... instead of providing more and better educational opportunities, school desegregation has meant White flight along with a loss of African-American teaching and administrative positions” (p. 56). Crenshaw (1988) argues that we cannot rest alone on the courts to eradicate racism. “Rather, antidiscrimination law represents an ongoing ideological struggle in which occasional winners harness the moral, coercive, consensual power of law” (p.1335). Critical race theorists believed that critical legal studies were more concerned with interpreting the law rather than deconstructing the problem of racism. Even though the ruling of *Brown v. the Board of Education* was a landmark decision, Critical race theorists assert that schools are now more segregated than ever and in fact, civil rights laws benefit Whites more often than Blacks (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 14).

Many scholars asserted that White women have significantly benefited in hiring policies and job protection since the implementation of affirmative action (Guy-Sheftall, 1993, Tatum, 2003; Delgado, 1998). Bell (1980) argued that “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (p. 523). This principle, known as *Interest Convergence*, posits that social justice advancement for Black citizens only occurs when there is a direct benefit for White citizens. In other words, “the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its interests to do so” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 149).

Bell (1980) in his article critiquing the 1954 Supreme Court Justice decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* asserts that the Court’s decision to repeal the separate

but equal laws concerning education, cannot be “understood without some consideration of the decision’s value to whites, not simply those concerned about the immorality of racial inequality” (p. 524). He outlines three major factors that contributed to the overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Bell (1980) stated, “First, the decision helped to provide immediate credibility to America’s struggle with Communist countries to win the hearts and minds of emerging third world peoples” (p. 524). Secondly, Black veterans who “faced not only continuing discrimination, but also violent attacks in the south which rivaled those that took place at the conclusion of World War I” (p. 524) needed to be addressed. Finally, it was realized that only when the South ended its “struggle to remain divided by state-sponsored segregation” could it “make the transition from a rural plantation society to the sunbelt. . .” (p. 524). In asserting itself as a world leader, America had to prove to the international audience that it did indeed live up to the creed “all men are created equal” (p. 524). Bell aptly points out that Black citizens had been challenging the separate but equal laws for nearly one hundred years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Lopez (2003), Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas (1995) argue that most people see racism as “an individual and irrational act in a world that is otherwise neutral, rational, and just” (Lopez, 2003, p. 69). This philosophy perpetuates a colorblind society, one that believes that racism is personal and individualized “as opposed to a social and /or civilizational construct” (Lopez, 2003, p. 70). The court system encouraged this tenet through its rulings. As a result of this view, “the notion that racism is a personal as opposed to systemic issue” shrouds the real tragedy of racism (Lopez, 2003, p. 69).

Race in America

In order to better understand the concept of CRT and how it intersects with educational equity for students of color, one must first understand the concept of race in the United States. Takaki (1993) stated, “Race, as we will see, has been a social construction that has historically set apart racial minorities from European immigrant groups” (p. 10). The United States has a long history of marginalizing the Other that includes African Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Jews, Hispanics, Irish, Native Americans, and women.

Parker and Stovall (2004) argue that “race has played a fundamental role in (a) the making of nation – empire that evolves into a system of conquest and enslavement; (b) the creation of capital; and (c) the shaping of culture and identity, especially in the creation of subordinate racialized groups” (p. 170). While many of the sub cultures in the United States have assimilated themselves into the dominant society who yields power, many people of color have not been able to achieve assimilation. Some sub cultures according to Bloom (1987), will not “melt as have all other groups; they have become ethnic” (p. 19). Bloom faults the liberal university system for encouraging a system of separatism with course offerings such as ‘Black Studies’. Hirsh (1987) concurs, “Multicultural education ... should not be allowed to supplant or interfere with our schools’ responsibility to ensure our children’s master of American literate culture” (p. 96).

The United States has had a longstanding obsession with race. In the 1890 census, the question of race was introduced. Lee (1993) found sixteen different classifications. There were also degrees of being Black such as “mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon” (Lee,

1993). Many sub cultures have petitioned the courts to be classified as White to include the Cherokee Indians, Mexican Americans, and Chinese Americans (Takaki, 1993, Ladson-Billings, 2005). So the real issue is not necessarily the black/white binary as much as it is the way everyone regardless of his/her declared racial and ethnic identity is positioned in relation to Whiteness” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 116).

The idea that divergent cultures cannot get along has long been used as a tactic to discourage the integration of a multicultural curriculum. However, “the disastrous consequences of failing to find compatibility between values and goals of groups of people has seen whole nations and ethnic groups oppose each other with violence and hatred” (Fox, 2007, p. 118). It is imperative that educators be cognizant that “destruction of cultures begins through schooling” (Morris, 2009, p. 266). It is through the institution of schooling that hegemony continues to thrive. Morris posits “public schooling has always been a place of miseducation, under-education and factory training” (Morris, 2009, p. 187). Using the lens of critical race theory allows educators to examine the racialized experiences of the Other.

Critical race theory seeks to deconstruct how race and racism impacts our society, but most especially in the area of education. CRT seeks “to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America and to change the bond that exists between law and radical power” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, 1995, xiii). Critical race theory does more than just theorize about racism, it is also a theory of action. “CRT is a theory, but it also operates as a weapon in struggle by providing tools with which to address the concerns of African Americans in education” (Stovall, 2005, p. 198). CRT recognizes

that “racism is persistent in the lives of people of color in the United States” (Stovall, 2005, p. 198).

Critical race theorists are not satisfied with just research for research sake. They are less concerned with figures and statistics, but instead search for new approaches and understandings that will lead to eradicating racism in the public schools as well as all through society. Critical race theorists are not passive participants. Yamamoto (1997) urges CRT advocates to “spending less time on abstract theorizing and more time on community-based educational efforts (p. 873). “Stovall (2005) argues “CRT is not a plea for understanding. Rather, it is a response aimed at changing the realities of the public institutions, including education” (p. 199).

Critical race theorists have stirred up the pot in that they have brought racism to the forefront and do not sugar coat the obvious. Although it is difficult to separate classism from racism we must be cognizant of the fact that the United States was initially created using race as divisive chord in order to procure a two tier class system. Stovall (2006) cautions “it would be incorrect to devalue the relationship between race and class in education. Race and class are and can be central to analysis of hegemony,” which is prevalent in the curriculum of our schools. Because critical race scholars tackle race head on and refuse to rely on the legal system to address the de facto apartheid in our country, we have no choice but to squarely look racism in the eye, no matter how repulsive or painful.

Critical Race Theory and Education

Critical race theory is of vital importance in the area of education. Johnathan Kozol (1991) in his book, *Savage Inequalities*, discusses the monetary disparity of

various school systems in the nation. He provides a snapshot of the inequity of funds provided for an inner city school in New York. For example, “average expenditures per pupil in the city of New York in 1987 were some \$5,500 dollars. In the highest spending suburbs of New York, funding rose above \$11,000, with the highest districts in the state of \$15,000” (p. 83-84). This disparity of how monies fund and do not fund equitable schooling for inner city students is supported in Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*. This article examines how school inequity is perpetuated. The authors assert that educational inequalities “are a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (p. 47). The principals of their argument are:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and consequently, school) inequity. (p. 48)

Property rights directly affect the monies afforded to school districts in the way of property taxes. Property taxes affect the amount of dollars spent per pupil, but the more insidious result of property taxes’ relationship with education is how it affects what Ladson-Billings and Tate refer to as intellectual property. Intellectual property refers to how “the quality and quantity of the curriculum varies with the property values of the school” (p. 54). Intellectual property can also be understood as those things that can be “undergirded by real property such as science labs, computers, and other state of the art technologies, appropriately certified and prepared teachers (p. 54).

The authors provide a personal narrative of two teenage boys, (one of whom is the son of one of the co-authors, the other a friend of the son) about to enter into high school. One boy will attend an “upper-middle-class white school . . . and the other would be attending a school in an urban, largely African-American district” (p. 54). The types of courses offered to each student is illuminating and further illustrates the inequities children of color face within the very institution that is supposed to liberate them. The boy who will attend the middle-class, mostly White suburban school has a choice between eight foreign languages, seven mathematics course, and seven different science courses while the boy who will attend the inner city, mostly minority populated school has only a choice of two foreign languages, three math courses, and four science courses. How can students who are not afforded the same type of curriculum compete with those who enjoy the privilege of an “enriched” (p. 54) curriculum? Is it any wonder why the achievement gap continues to widen between students of color who are provided a less than stellar curriculum than those of their White peers in the suburbs?

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) posit that “because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (p. 7). Is it fair then for educational reforms such as the NCLB Act to measure students from the inner city or rural areas who have little or no intellectual property against those whose intellectual property is far better and expect the same results?

Critique of Critical Race Theory

Although critical race theory has been in existence a short time, there has been no shortage of criticism of this particular mode of curriculum inquiry. Critical race theory maintains that its purpose is to unveil the systemic pulse of racism that permeates the lives of all citizens of the United States, be they of color or not; therefore it can be deemed by many as offensive, just by its title alone. The word race or racism conjures up many different opinions and depending upon one's own life experiences, racism or race can play a significant role or little or no role in one's own life.

Most people would object to Richard Delgado's (2000) statement that "...racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society. Racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape; therefore it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture" (p. xvi). Taylor (1999) posited that racism is a "fact of daily life in society, and the assumptions of White superiority are so ingrained in our political and legal structures as to be almost unrecognizable" (p. 183). Taylor asserted that critical race scholars seek to deconstruct and illuminate how the dominating race serves as the benchmark for all peoples experiences and to understand how the marginalized have been censored, thus silencing their voice, their contributions, accomplishments, and their trials and tribulations.

Many critics of critical race theory discount various components of CRT, in particular the use of narrative story telling. Unlike traditional research, critical race theory does not rely on empirical data alone. Although the dominant White cannon has used narrative storytelling to tell its perspective for decades, the use of narrative has begun to be scrutinized since marginalized people of all walks have begun to use

narrative as a means of counter-acting the well-established stories. Delgado (1989) referred to these as “counterstories” (p. 2414) in which subordinated groups of people are provided a platform that “can open new windows into reality, showing us there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live” (p. 2414).

Johnson (1994) pointed out that people who identify with the oppressed use narrative counterstories as a means of leveling out the field of academia that until recently was not available. “Euro-American scholars have used Narrative for many years and scholars of color trace their use of it to its use by Euro-American scholars. What is troubling is that Narrative came under attack when Critical Race Theorists began using it as their primary vehicle for expression” (p. 835). Farber and Sherry (1993) postulated that Critical Race Theory provided “little insight into any broad differences between voices of color and supportive White voices” (p. 815). They take issue with narrative storytellers’ practice of using narrative as the core of their “scholarship, while de-emphasizing conventional analytic methods” (p. 808), and their use of “stories from the bottom – stories by women and people of color about their oppression” (p. 808). The authors impeach CRT’s use of storytelling and accuse them of being “less concerned than conventional scholars about whether stories are either typical or descriptively accurate, and they place more emphasis on the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of narration” (p. 808). West (2001) however, believes counterstories will provide “New frameworks and languages to understand our multilayered crisis” (p. 6) that people of color encounter on a daily basis in our nation.

Kennedy (1989) in his article, *Racial Critiques of Legal Academia* argued that membership in a group does not imply expertise.

Even if the scholarship at issue was narrowly concerned with the inner - experience of a single racial group, it would still be improper to presume expertise merely on the basis of a scholar's membership in a given group. One's racial (gender, religious, regional) identity is no substitute for the disciplined study essential to achieving expertise. Although one is born with certain physical characteristics to which society attaches various labels, one is not born with the knowledge we expect of experts; that characteristic is something that is attained and not merely inherited (p. 1777).

Delgado (1990) in his article, *When a Story is Just a Story: Does Voice Really Matter?* rebutted Kennedy's allegation that using the voice of color; Critical Race Theory scholarship is "seriously flawed" (p. 96). Delgado emphasized that because Kennedy aligns himself with the dominant group of scholars, who discount CRT and narrative storytelling, he therefore, perpetuated the mindset that the courts neatly take care of racism in our nation. Narrative storytelling "broadens our point of view, bringing to light the abuses, and petty and major tyrannies that minority communities suffer can enable us to see and correct systemic injustices that might otherwise remain invisible" (p. 109).

Critical race theory is a valuable asset in exploring the underrepresentation of African Americans in the gifted and AP courses because of their recognition of African Americans' difficulties in pursuing their educational goals in a dominant White environment. Black students have unique social and cultural histories, different from their

White peers, which frame their perspective of the world and how they perceive the world views them. CRT views people of color as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Bernal, 2002, p. 108); therefore, participants in this study provided insights and new knowledge leading to discourse among the educators who serve these students.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

*The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (Psalm 34:17-18)*

This qualitative study regarding the declining number of African American students in gifted and advanced placement courses is grounded in two distinct inquiries; Critical Narrative Inquiry (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008) and Personal, Passionate, Participatory Inquiry (He and Phillion (2008). I have chosen Critical Race Narrative as the primary means to analyze my participants' stories. Critical race narrative, also known as counterstories, provides a forum in which people of color, indeed, all oppressed peoples, can challenge the dominant master narrative. Sirotnik (1991) posits that critical inquiry is one of praxis, a tool to bring about change and action.

Critical Narrative Inquiry

Critical narrative inquiry incorporates two forms of research; critical inquiry and narrative inquiry. Critical inquiry provides a platform in which “important questions about the control and production of knowledge – particularly knowledge about people and communities of color” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 423) can be unearthed. Critical inquiry is “based upon a commitment to social justice . . . and to the simple, yet enduring morality that underlies the Golden Rule” (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 245). Researchers who use critical inquiry are “concerned, in particular, with issues of power and justice and the ways the economy; matters of race, class, and gender; ideologies; discourses, education;

religion, and other social institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008, p. 407).

I view the issue of the declining number of Black students in the gifted and Advanced Placement classes from several lenses. Primarily, I view this issue from a social justice lens. Since beginning the doctoral program at Georgia Southern, I have become aware of how “racism, sexism, and classism (three of the great struggles of the age)” (Noddings, 1998, p. 68) intersect in the institution we call school.

Schools, I have learned, are a microcosm of the larger society and as such, much of what takes place in schools in regards to Black students is later reproduced in the larger arena of life. Black students are more likely than White students, to be recipients of more punitive punishment; to have a higher high school dropout rate, and are overly represented in Special Education Classes, while simultaneously being underrepresented in elementary and middle school gifted programs as well as Advanced Placement and Honors classes in High School.. Kincheloe and McLaren (2008) described how Critical Inquiry can be used to seek justice for the oppressed.

Critical research can be understood best in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name of “critical” must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor un-embarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness. Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guardrail of

neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world. (p. 406).

Juxtaposed with my participant's stories, critical narrative inquiry is a good fit because "the contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42).

Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that "narrative inquiry is the study of experience. Narrative, they say, is the closest one can come to experience" (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005, p. 254). Through the use of narrative inquiry, I will be allowed as a researcher, temporarily, to join the life of my participants, "to understand, make meaning, and enhance the quality of life" (p. 255). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) described the qualitative researcher as a "quilt maker" (2008, p. 5) in which the qualitative researcher . . . is like a quilt maker or a jazz improviser. The quilter stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together" (p. 7). As I listened to the stories of gifted Black students, it was through their storied lives and experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that enabled me to gain a perspective into their lives.

Many voices have been silenced or muted because their story was not deemed important. The experiences of women, people of color, children of the working class, gays, lesbians, war veterans, and many others have been overlooked. Through personal interviews with gifted Black students, it was my goal that their voices, stories, and experiences would be heard. It was my goal that the stories of these students would

influence me and other educators to be more reflective and gain a deeper insight as to the influence each of us has upon our students.

I was drawn to narrative inquiry because, unlike formalistic research that often begins with defining a problem in order to “replicate and apply a theory to the problem at hand,” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 41), narrative inquiry “characteristically begins with the researcher’s autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the research puzzle” (p. 41). Narrative inquiry provided a scaffold, which enabled me to pursue my inquiry through several different lenses (Glense, 2006, p. 122). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described narrative “as the best way of representing and understanding experiences” (p. 18). Furthermore, they also asserted, “Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (p. 19).

In addition to viewing the paucity of Black students in gifted and Advanced Placement programs through a social justice lens, I also viewed this topic through a personal lens. As a White mother of four bi-racial children, the youngest who at the beginning of this study was in the gifted program in Middle School, I was concerned that one day, like his older sister, he might have wanted to leave the program or refuse to participate in Advanced Placement classes in High School because he felt out of place. As I wrote about my participant’s lived experiences I was challenged to adjust my own positionality in the study. Casey (1995-1996) pointed out, “Whether implicit, or elaborate, every study of narrative is based on a particular understanding of the speaker’s

self” (p. 213). The counterstories I retold in this research not only were my participants’ story, but could very well be my son’s and daughter’s story.

So the question is not, “Does my story reflect my past accurately?” as if I were holding a mirror to my past. Rather I must ask, “What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?” The crucial issues are what narrative do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 221).

From personal lens, I asked myself, “What consequences will be experienced if the stories of these students are not told? According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), my dual role of parent and educator could not separate me from my participants’ stories, but instead I was drawn in because I was complicit in the world I studied.

...as narrative inquirers we work within the space not only without participants but also with ourselves. Working in this space means that we become visible with our own lived and told stories. Sometimes, this means that our own unnamed, perhaps secret, stories come to light as much as those of our participants. This confronting of ourselves in our narrative past makes us vulnerable as inquirers because it makes secret stories public. (p. 62-63)

As I narrated my participant’s lived experiences, the knowledge I gained enabled me and other educators to take action that resulted in deeper understanding of their role in the underrepresentation of African American students in the gifted and Advanced Placement program. While I drew on my own experiences to make sense of my

participants' stories, I did not see myself as the expert, but instead, as an interpreter and a transformer.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referenced John Dewey as the seminal thinker of experience in the field of education and informed us that “for Dewey, experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in social context” (p. 2). I viewed the experiences and stories of gifted Black students who chose to leave or chose to never participate in the gifted programs at their schools like a two way mirror into the present and the future of our society.

Finally, I viewed my inquiry into this study from a cultural lens. As a White female educator, I had to question and challenge my own privilege that my Whiteness has afforded me, and how this privilege was perceived by others. As a mother of four biracial children, who for all practical purposes were considered Black by society, I am in a unique position to examine and challenge the status quo. Gifted programs, even though riddled with imperfections, are sadly, often the only space in schools in which the highest achieving students can be mentored.

The dilemma I faced was determining if I should advocate getting additional gifted Black students into a program that would give them a push in a positive direction, knowing full well that the gifted program was a flawed system, a system that segregated children and contributed to a two-tiered classism in our schools? Do I push for them to join a program, which once enrolled in, because of the limited number of students that

resemble themselves, could cause them to question their identity and their placement in the program? A program that may not reciprocate benefits in exchange for sacrificing their culture.

I grappled with the knowledge that perhaps there could be another, less invasive manner in which gifted Black students could be empowered to realize their potential; however, I had to work and challenge the system that was in place, as it was the only one available. In an ideal setting, all schools and teachers would offer a challenging, enriching curriculum. In an ideal setting, all students would be nurtured, regardless of their abilities or cultural background. However, the reality was that the status quo excluded the Other. The obstacles that discouraged, omitted, and undermined a particular group of students from realizing their highest potential hindered them from applying to “elite colleges and universities and, thereby, contributing to the achievement gap in higher education” (Ford, Grantham, Whiting, 2008, p. 222) thus perpetuating an underclass that continue to be disenfranchised. Through the lived experiences of gifted Black students, I obtained a perspective often not considered, that of the student. It was only when the students themselves shared their counterstories we were able to bring about any change.

Personal ~ Passionate ~ Participatory Inquiry

Prior to enrolling in the Curriculum Studies Program at GSU, my understanding of research was narrow and clinical. The research I conducted at the undergraduate and post graduate level required little of my own thoughts, opinions, and experiences. The idea of immersing myself as an active participant in my research has been earth shaking!

He's and Phillion's (2008) personal ~ passionate ~ participatory inquiry juxtaposed with critical narrative inquiry was a perfect fit because, like narrative inquiry, personal ~ passionate ~ participatory inquiry "is peopled with characters, rather than filled with categories and labels" (p. 14) and like critical narrative inquiry, personal ~ passionate ~ participatory inquiry lends itself to seeking social justice for those who have been overlooked and silenced.

Personal ~ passionate ~ participatory inquiry allowed me "to connect the practical with the theoretical, and the personal with the political, through passionate participation in, and critical reflection upon inquiry and life" (2008, p. 3). Researchers who use personal ~ passionate ~ participatory inquiry are more concerned with the personal because their story is interweaved with their participants. They are passionate about discovering what "is missing from the official story" (p. 3) and less concerned with research for research's sake.

They are not detached observers, nor putatively objective recorders, but active participants in schools, families, and communities. Researchers are immersed in lives, take on the concerns of people who are marginalized and disfranchised, and act upon those concerns. Rather than aiming solely at traditional academic outcomes, positive social and educational change is the focal outcome of inquiry. (He and Phillion, 2008, p. 2)

This research was personal because I watched on the sidelines as my own child navigated her way through high school as a gifted Black student. She was somehow, unable to juxtapose her giftedness with being Black, as if she had to give up one to be the

other. I contemplated if she was perhaps experiencing the phenomena of ‘in-betweeness’. In-betweeness, a term used by Ming Fang He (2002a) embodies the inability to “feel at home in either place” (p. 302). He, a native of China and a professor at Georgia Southern University, explained that as she moved between China, Canada, and the United States to pursue her education and career, she experienced a “cultural, educational and language strangeness” (p. 301) that created in her a dissonance in which she never has been able to reconcile. On a visit home to China, He recounts a caution from her father. “Ming Fang, it’s so nice to have you back. But don’t ever forget you are a Chinese” (He, 2002b, p. 323). Like He, many gifted Black students feel a sense of in-betweeness as they struggle to find their place in gifted programs as well as Advanced Placement courses.

I was passionate about this research because far too many of our gifted Black students were waiving their opportunity to participate in gifted classes, Advanced Placement classes as well as Honors Classes and were instead settling for less challenging course work. This, in turn, led them to be unprepared and ill equipped for college, which in turn led to a higher percentage dropping out than their White peers. I was passionate about this research because through my readings and experiences, I recognized the damage teachers cause to Black students when they are unaware of their own privilege and how it impacts their daily decisions and interactions with the curriculum they choose or not choose to include when they close their classroom door. I no longer could be complicit and idly watch Black students struggle with finding their place in school.

Critical Race Narrative- The Counterstories

People have been telling stories as long as the world has been turning. Critical race narrative employs a specific type of storytelling, counter-storytelling, which challenges the status quo story, also known as the stock story. Delgado described the stock story as the story told by the dominant group of a particular society. The stock story allows the dominant group to rationalize its “privileged position by means of stories, stock explanations that construct reality in ways favorable to it” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438). These stock stories provide the backdrop from which the status quo develops its reality. The narrators of the stock story are comprised of the ingroups; individuals who make up the dominant group, while those who create counter-stories, are comprised of the outgroups; individuals whose “voice and perspective – consciousness – has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412). The ingroups’ stories reinforce their own belief of their superiority to others.

The use of Critical Race Narrative provides a platform for outgroups whose voice has been muted to deconstruct the in-group’s dominant discourse. Delgado compared the ingroups’ stories to wearing a pair of eyeglasses. We are so accustomed to wearing the eyeglasses that we often forget we have them on. The glasses become one with us and we rarely question the prescription, or challenge the doctor’s wisdom in prescribing them. We simply assume the prescription is correct.

Stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that ultimately bring us closer together. They allow us to see how the world looks from behind

someone else's spectacles. They challenge us to wipe off our own lenses and ask, "Could I have been overlooking something all along?" (p. 2440)

Regrettably, gifted Black students – the outgroup have not had many opportunities to share their experiences, good or bad, and consequently, many educators assume that their low numbers cannot be helped. Through the use of Critical Race Narrative, outgroups and ingroups alike benefitted from this study. "Listening to the stories of outgroups can avoid intellectual apartheid" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440), while validating the ingroups perspective. "Powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of adjustment in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity" (Delgado, 2001, 43). In her article, *Telling Tales: What Stories Can Teach Us About Racism*, Bell (2003) concluded that "Whites are, in fact, often taken by surprise when confronted with alternative scenarios and interpretations of racial experience" (Bell, 2003, p. 5).

Don't Be So Sensitive

Bell's conclusion was reminiscent of an encounter I had with one of my son's teachers, Mrs. Pennyworth. During a parent-teacher conference, I relayed to her that a White classmate of Isaiah's had made a racially negative comment to him concerning the number of Black students in a newly formed club. The club was a national academic club made up of students who maintained a 3.7 GPA, scored in the exceed region of their most recent state mandated standardized test, and were nominated by their teacher. Isaiah, a seventh grader, along with other classmates had been invited to become members. Once assembled in the cafeteria for their introduction into the club, the student,

who was seated next to Isaiah, looked around the room, and said, “Oh, great! I’m in a club with a bunch of Blacks. I thought this was a club for smart kids.” Isaiah mentioned the boy’s comment to one of his teachers, who responded with, “I’m sure he was just kidding, don’t be so sensitive.”

As I explained to Mrs. Pennyworth the challenges Black students, in particular, Black boys face in school she became very defensive, visibly rattled, tearful, and at one time pushed her chair away from the table and began to stand up as though she was going to leave the room. She informed me that all students were treated well, there were no differences in treatment toward Black and White students, and she resented being lumped into that category. “Whites who espouse color-blindness often become frustrated and/or angry when People of Color and White anti-racists insist that Americans must recognize race and racial inequality in the USA if we are ever to reduce or eradicate racism” (Bell, 2003, p. 17). She then relayed to me a personal story of her own son, age 23, and how she has seen him mistreated because he had dreadlocks down his back. She reiterated how she knew first-hand the anguish he has suffered because he is a non-conformist.

I pointed out to Mrs. Pennyworth that she and her son were both White, and although the story, while showcasing intolerance towards her son because of his preferred hairstyle, was not the same as Isaiah’s because at the end of the day, her son is White and will always be White. Regardless of his hairstyle, he will always fit in with the dominant culture. He consciously chooses to be different. Isaiah and other children of color do not have a choice.

I was not surprised at her reaction. I relayed to her that as a parent of a Black boy, I was in the crosshairs of how best to educate and prepare Isaiah for the realities of racism he will face as a Black male. In the book, *The Miner's Canary*, (2002) co-author Guinier described the dilemma she was faced with in educating her son about the perils of racism. "A failure to acknowledge difference is a failure to prepare him for a world in which his differences may matter – a world in which when he walks down the street, White cops might stop him or other Black males may resent him" (Guinier & Torres, 2002, p. 3). I further explained to Mrs. Pennyworth that while I disliked having to prepare Isaiah for the real possibility that some people will think less of him or worse of him because of his skin color or gender, to not do so would be to abdicate my responsibility as a parent.

To this day, I'm uncertain if I made any impression on Mrs. Pennyworth. She never did acknowledge the racial slight made to Isaiah, but instead became defensive. Bell (2003) stated, "Given that the lived realities of Whites and People of Color are different, it is not surprising that their perceptions of the world differ as well" (p. 5). Her unwillingness to even consider the challenges Isaiah and other minority students endured each day confirmed for me the value and the need for counter-stories in my study. Through the sharing of racialized lived experiences of gifted Black students, it was my hope to begin a discourse in which their narratives could be "a tool for developing a more critical consciousness about social relations in our society" (Bell, 2003, p. 4).

Story Collection and Analysis

Story collection methods included personal interviews; formal and unstructured, observations, and the collection of documents. Glesne (2006) asserted that through the interview process a researcher is afforded the “opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see” as “the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry” (p. 81). Too often, the perspectives and opinions of the students themselves are not considered when educators are seeking to change or enhance policy (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). “Consistently, the focus of reform is on what adults and schools should do to improve student achievement, with students treated as passive subjects who can easily be molded to conform to our expectations” (Noguera, 2003, p. 454).

The participants for this study were selected upon meeting the following criteria: students were identified as gifted and Black. This information was gleaned from the school district’s data. Once students were identified, the screening continued with selecting five students who either had dropped out of the gifted program/advanced placement course work, or elected to never participate .

In his book, *Teaching Toward Freedom*, Ayers (2004) explains that students are not objects, but individuals, “Filled with his or her own hopes and aspirations” (p. 35), and as teachers, we interact with them “By standing with them, not above them. We share their predicaments, and we do so in solidarity with them” (p. 35). Narrative inquiry was a good fit for my study because it allowed me as the researcher to become immersed into the lived experiences of my participants. “Narrative is the closest one can come to

experience” (Phillion, He, Connelly, 2005, p.254). As I listened to my participants, I “Met myself in the past, the present and the future (Clandin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60). I was not just an observer from afar, but drawn in, and in the process I was transformed as a teacher and mother as I came face to face with my participants’ narratives. He, Phillion, Chan, & Xu (2008) describe my transformation as a “curriculum of shared interests.”

In a curriculum of shared interests, teachers cultivate cultural competence to recognize contributions of ethnically and linguistically diverse students. They develop pedagogical competence to enrich the curriculum for immigrant and minority students. Students are encouraged to value their cultural and linguistic heritages, respect and accept difference, critically examine their positions in society; and perceive themselves as agents of positive curriculum change. (p. 231)

The interweaving of narrative inquiry and personal ~ passionate ~ participatory inquiry allowed me to pursue an issue I care deeply about; the high number of underrepresented African American students being served in gifted and AP programs. The participants’ stories highlight the “Structural inequalities” (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005, p.10) that have been too long ignored.

CHAPTER FIVE

STORY COLLECTION

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but they that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up on wings like an eagle; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah, 40: 30-31)

The goal of this study was to discover why a high percentage of Black students who are eligible to participate in Honors and Advanced Placement courses choose not to participate. According to the *AP Report to the Nation (College Board, 2012)*, statistics show that that 80% of Black students who have the potential to be successful in AP classes do not enroll. The secondary goal of this study was to determine how the history and institution of gifted education has aided and excluded Black students, and what role do educators have in the decision of Black students who drop out or elect not to participate in gifted, Advanced Placement, and Honors classes.

This research project began as a result of my own awareness of the paucity of Black students participating in the gifted program in my school district and my daughter's reluctance to remain enrolled in her Advanced Placement classes while in high school. As I waded through the literature, I came to the realization that identification as a gifted student in elementary and middle school plays a significant role in who enrolls in Honors and AP classes at the high school level. Identification as a gifted student often serves as an automatic referral and acceptance into Honors/AP classes in high school. Students who do not participate in gifted programs are often overlooked and not considered for Advance Placement courses.

Research has shown that too many minority children have been denied access to gifted programs due to teachers biases (Ford & Whiting, 2008, Hale, 2001, Kunjufu, 2005, Noguera, 2008) and deficit thinking (Ford et al., 2008b; Guiner & Torres, 2002; Hooks, 2003; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005; Thompson, 2004). The Department of Education (2008) reported that only 3% of students in gifted classes across the nation are Black, yet they comprise over one third of the public school population in grades kindergarten through Grade 12-(LaDucke, 2009). Ford and Grantham (2003) posited that “at no point during its history has the field of gifted education been able to boast of having a representative number of minority students” (p. 224).

Even though high school students have the option of choosing to enroll in Honors and AP classes, the classroom teacher and the high school guidance counselor, like the elementary teacher, are the gate keepers. Teachers and counselors who operate from a deficit philosophy and consider cultural differences as negative attributes will often not recommend Black students for gifted testing or Honors and AP classes. Giftedness as well as the ability to be successful in AP classes are more often than not, “defined and measured by the majority culture” (Fletcher-Jantzen & Ortiz, 2006, p. 135), in this case, by White teachers (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005, p. 26).

The purpose of this chapter is to present and analyze the data gathered from the research study. Beginning with an overall picture of the school in which the study was conducted, I provide a personal statement of the rationale, the process of choosing the participants, a short description of each participant, and finally the emerging themes which were extrapolated from the interviews. Each of the participants was allowed to

choose a pseudonym for the study. In addition, all teachers, schools, family members, and friends of the participants were also provided pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and insure confidentiality. The county in which this study took place was also assigned a pseudonym.

School Snapshot

This study took place in Marshall County (a pseudonym), a small rural farming community located in Central Georgia. Marshall County has a population of 23, 476 people. The population consists of 57 % White, 41 % Black, and 2 % Hispanic. The median income level is \$38,235 per year. Approximately 4,300 students attended Marshall County School district in Grades Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12. Eighty three percent of the student population receives free or reduced lunch. Marshall County School district is a Title 1 school system and each student, regardless of income, receives a free breakfast each day.

Marshall County School district has seven schools: four elementary schools, one middle school, one high school and one alternative school. All the schools, with the exception of the alternative school, feed into the middle school, which feeds into Thurgood High School (a pseudonym). Thurgood High School functions on an A/B day schedule in which students take four classes each day. Each class is an hour and half long in duration. Honors and Advanced classes are offered beginning with Grade 9, while Advanced Placement classes begin to be offered in Grade 11. The total number of Advanced Placement classes available to students during the year of this research study was five.

At the time of this research study, a total of 1,127 students were in attendance at Thurgood High School. Thurgood High School's graduation rate is 77.91 %. It is the highest graduation rate when compared with similar high schools in neighboring counties.

Table 1

Composition of the Student Population by Ethnicity and Gender

| Grade Level | Black Males | Black Females | White Males | White Females | Multi-Racial Males |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 9 | 96 | 84 | 84 | 90 | 3 |
| 10 | 77 | 52 | 78 | 64 | 4 |
| 11 | 63 | 68 | 62 | 54 | 2 |
| 12 | 46 | 58 | 48 | 48 | 1 |
| Total | 282 | 262 | 272 | 256 | 10 |

| Grade Level | Multi-Racial Females | Hispanic Males | Hispanic Females | Asian Males | Asian Females |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 9 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| 10 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 11 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 0 | 1 |
| 12 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 11 | 14 | 16 | 2 | 2 |

Table 2 provides data to show the composition of the faculty by ethnicity. Data collected on students and faculty members were used to ascertain the imbalance between faculty members and the students they serve.

Table 2

Composition of the Faculty by Ethnicity and Gender

| Ethnicity | # of Teachers | Percent |
|-----------|---------------|---------|
| White | 51 | 79.69 |
| Black | 13 | 20.31 |
| Total | 64 | 100 |

I am a fourth grade teacher at Deerwood Elementary School, one of Marshall's seven schools. I have taught in Marshall County for 22 years. I am now teaching the children of the children of my former students. My son, Isaiah, has attended Deerwood Elementary, Thurgood Middle School, and is now a freshman at Thurgood High School. I have a vested interest in this study both professionally and personally. I have taught many students who had the potential to be successful in Honors and AP classes but as an elementary teacher, I am not present to guide them when they are choosing their high school courses. My goal is that the students' narratives reverberate in a resounding call in order that educators can take a more proactive role in assisting students to realize their fullest potential. It is the perspective and lived experiences of the students themselves that

must be heard in order for educators to make Honors and AP classes more inclusive and welcoming. “The time to open doors to gifted and AP classes is long overdue” (Ford & Whiting, 2008, p. 301).

Selection of Participants

I approached Mr. Charles Solomon, the principal of Thurgood High School in August of 2013. I gave him an overview of my literature review, my student survey, parent and student consent forms, and my interview questions. Mr. Solomon readily shared with me his frustration and passion concerning the underrepresentation of Black students enrolled in Honors and AP classes. He was concerned particularly about the Black male students. As a principal, father of four children, and a man of color, Mr. Solomon was acutely aware that a less than rigorous education is harmful to all students, but can be especially crippling for Black students.

Upon approval from Mr. Solomon, I contacted Mr. Langston, the College Advisor of the high school. Mr. Langston pulled the class ranking list of all the senior and junior classes. He used the students' GPA to determine the students who demonstrated potential success in AP classes. He used the raw score of 80% or higher as his benchmark. Of the 49 Black male seniors, 13 had a GPA higher than 80%. Five of these had a GPA higher than 85%. The highest GPA held by one of these seniors had a class ranking of 30 out of the total senior class population.

From the junior class ranking of 250 students, 63 were Black males. Of these 63 students, 11 had a GPA higher than 80%, and 5 had a GPA higher than 85%. Of these 11 students, one had a class ranking of 7 out of the total junior class population.

From this list, Mr. Langston submitted six possible participants to the principal, Mr. Solomon. I would like to point out that while the six possible candidates were all male, it was not a requirement for me, but rather I think out of Mr. Solomon's grave concern for his male students. I did, however, ask for one participant by name, Andrea. I taught Andrea (a pseudonym) in third grade at Deerwood Elementary School. I happened to bump into her at a BETA Club Induction ceremony at the high school. After explaining my research project, Andrea agreed to be a participant as well. I submitted her name to Mr. Langston and Mr. Solomon for permission for Andrea to be in the study. Permission was granted. Andrea was the second highest ranked minority student in the senior class.

In October of 2013, arrangements were made through Mr. Solomon and the guidance office for me to meet with the potential participants during their lunch break in the Media Center of the high school. All seven of the students arrived. I introduced myself to them, explained the reason for my project, and why they were selected. Three of the seven students, James, Andrea, and Sean were former students of mine from Deerwood Elementary School. I gave each student a stamped envelope addressed to me at my school. Each envelope contained a letter of introduction to them and their parents explaining the research project, a letter of consent for the student and parent to sign, and a short survey for the student to complete.

Of the seven possible participants, five responded, stating that they would participate in the study. Two of the interviews, Sean and James,' took place at the high school after school. Andrea requested that we hold the interview in my classroom as she

wanted to see her old school. Lorenzo's interview was conducted in a conference room at the county's Government Complex during Christmas break, while Jamal's interview took place in a conference room in the public library, also during the Christmas break.

For each interview, I utilized a set of open ended questions, but I also allowed the participants to add any comments at the end of the interview. I also followed up on students' responses for clarification, which provided for me a deeper understanding of their experiences. Each interview was audio taped. Huseyin (2009) advocated the use of a tape recorder to insure that the researcher does not unconsciously exclude any "data favoring biases" (p. 205). The interviews were transcribed exactly as they were recorded. The transcribed interviews were given to participants for them to read, verify, and make any corrections. This step is known as member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in order to insure there are no inaccuracies. The majority of the interviews ranged from an hour to an hour and one half.

Immediately following each interview, I entered my observations and feelings about the interview in my journal. I felt it was important to record the participants' nonverbal responses, their attire, the interview location, interruptions, and anything else that might seem important. I also reflected on myself; how did I respond to my participant's answers? Did I appropriately follow up on their responses? Could I have probed deeper? What could I do differently the next time? Glense (2006) noted that researchers who keep a reflective field log will gain new insight when the analysis process begins (p. 148).

Once the transcripts were approved by each participant, I began the process of analyzing the data. I began by looking for common themes. As the themes emerged, I highlighted them in order to create clusters of commonalities that would answer my research questions. Themes regarding students reasons for not participating in Honors/AP classes were used to answer the general research question: What reasons do African American students give for not participating in gifted or Advanced Placement classes? Themes that emerged concerning students' perceptions about educators were used to answer the research question: What role do educators play in the decision making of African American students to participate in AP classes? I reviewed my themes and assigned common themes a code. Glesne (2006) described coding as "a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data (i.e., observation notes, interview transcripts, memos, documents, and notes from relevant literature) that are applicable to your research purpose" (p. 152).

The next stage was to look for similarities within these themes. I searched for words, phrases, and similar experiences among the participants. As similarities were noted, these themes were regrouped together. I then created a coding worksheet in which I recorded the participant, their response, and the page number in each transcript of each participant. I tallied up the number of times a response was repeated in order to conceptualize meaningful categories. I reviewed the themes multiple times in order to assure accuracy.

I also collected the academic records and standardized test scores of my participants from elementary and middle school as well as high school transcripts. My

purpose for collecting this data was to look for possible patterns that would support the participants' potential for success in the Honors and AP classes. Students also completed an Interest Survey, which I used to form my interview questions. I was also interested in examining the test results of my participants who had been tested for the gifted program. Four of my participants had been tested for the gifted program, but only one student, Jamal, qualified for the program.

In addition to collecting data about my participants through interviews, interest surveys, and academic achievement, I also collected a four year review of historical data on students who participated in the school system's gifted and Advanced Placement program. Glense (2006) posits that only through a multifaceted document collection process can a researcher "enrich what you see and hear by supporting, expanding, and challenging your portrayals and perceptions. Your understanding of the phenomenon in question grows as you make use of the documents and artifacts that are a part of people's lives" (p. 69). As I collected historical data in the way of school demographics, student participant demographic data, family demographic data, and my own personal observations from my field notes, I was able to capture a more robust understanding of my participants and their lived experiences.

Participant Profiles

Sean

Sean was the second youngest of eight children. He had one younger sibling, a brother, Blair, who also attended Thurgood High School as a sophomore. Sean lived with his mother, father, younger brother, and several older brothers and sisters. One of his

older sisters was a sophomore in college. Both of his parents were high school graduates. His mother held a CDA (associates degree) in Early Childhood Education.

Sean was a senior with a 93 GPA. He ranked 30 out of 197 students of the senior class. Sean had taken many Honors classes throughout high school, which include Calculus, Grade 9 Honors Literature, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Anatomy, World History, U.S. History, Government, and Economics. He did not, however, take any Advanced Placement courses. Sean has been a member of the band since middle school and was the Drum Line Captain of the high school band. He was also a member of the Junior ROTC program and held the rank of Senior Chief. Sean played the drums nearly every Sunday in church. Sean's career goal was to work in the Law Enforcement Field.

It took several attempts to finally set up an interview with Sean due to his commitments to the band and ROTC. When we conducted the interview, Sean was wearing his ROTC uniform. Although I had taught Sean in the third grade, I did not have any contact with him until the summer of 2013 when I saw him interacting with my son during Band Camp. It was neat to run into him and catch up with him and see how well he was doing. I was very pleased when I saw his name on Mr. Langston's list of possible participants. I believe that because Sean was a former student of mine and having seen him throughout the summer during Band Camp, I was able to reestablish a rapport with him quickly.

Andrea

Andrea was the youngest of three children. Her older sister was a college graduate who was unemployed. Her older brother dropped out of high school but did

receive his GED. He did not have a steady job. Andrea lived with her parents and older sister. Both parents had a high school diploma.

Andrea was a senior with a GPA of 95 at Thurgood High School. She is ranked 16th out of 197 students in the senior class. Andrea has taken Honors, Accelerated, and Advanced classes throughout her high school career. She has not however, taken any Advanced Placement classes. Andrea is very involved in extracurricular activities, which include BETA Club, a member of the Basketball team, and Track and Field team.

Andrea's career goal was to become a registered nurse.

Andrea expressed a desire to have the interview in my classroom because she hadn't been back to Deerwood Elementary since she'd left after fifth grade. She was very excited to see some of her former teachers. As I watched her glance around the classroom, I got the sense that she was reminiscing about her elementary years. She remarked that she would always have fond memories of Deerwood.

Lorenzo

Lorenzo was the middle child of three children. His older brother Jordan was serving in the U. S. Navy. His younger sister was in the sixth grade. Lorenzo lived with his mother and sister. His mother was a high school graduate.

Lorenzo was a junior with a GPA of 85 at Thurgood High School, and was ranked 99 out of the junior class of 257. Lorenzo had taken one Accelerated course. He was a member of the Junior ROTC program and played on the high school football team since ninth grade. His career goal was to become an athletic trainer or to work in the criminal justice field.

Due to his football schedule and ROTC commitments, I was not able to meet with Lorenzo until Christmas vacation. Although I had only met him once prior to the interview, I found him to be relaxed and eager to share his thoughts about his perceptions about the AP program. He confided in me that football hindered his studying time and he was looking forward to taking it easy after the season was finished.

James

James was the younger of two children. His older sister was in her final year at college. She was studying to be a physical therapist. Both of James' parents had two years of college. James lived at home with both of his parents.

James was a junior with a GPA of 87 at Thurgood High School, and was ranked 81 out of the junior class of 257 students. He had taken one accelerated class. His career goal is to be an anesthesiologist.

James did not participate in any extracurricular activities. He did enjoy playing basketball after school with his friends. Although James was a former student of mine, I could sense he was not completely comfortable during the interview. He was shy and somewhat guarded with his responses. He had a slight stuttering impediment and I believed, just as I believed when he was with me in third grade, that he was embarrassed by it and as a result was reluctant to speak aloud.

Jamal

Jamal was the oldest of three children. He had two younger sisters, one in seventh grades, and the other in second grade. Jamal lived with his mother and step-

father. He did not have much contact with his biological father. His mother graduated from college with a degree in psychology.

Jamal was a junior with a GPA of 97 at Thurgood High School and was ranked eight out of the junior class of 257 students. Jamal had taken Honors, Accelerated, Advanced, and Advanced Placement courses. He was very involved in extracurricular activities, which included BETA Club, Spanish Club, Marching Band, and Track and Field. Jamal's career goal was to be an Orthopedic Surgeon. At the time of our interview, he was just beginning a new job at a local fast food restaurant.

I was not able to catch up with Jamal until mid-December because of his heavy commitment to his afterschool clubs. I wanted to ensure that Jamal felt comfortable and safe while conducting the interview; therefore, our interview took place at the local library because I did not have any contact with him prior to the initial meeting in the school Media Center. Initially, Jamal seemed almost angry and his answers were very perfunctory. He described himself as being very bitter and mean as a result of the way his classmates treated him in elementary school. Of the five students who participated in my study, Jamal was the only student who qualified for the gifted program.

Emerging Themes

The following section summarizes the themes that emerged from my interviews with the students. How best to represent my participant's voice was a struggle for me. Throughout the coding and analyzing process, I looked for patterns and common themes among the voices of my participants. Several of the interviews lasted over an hour, and as I considered my audience, I came to the conclusion that I would use a synopsis of our

interviews that addressed the specific research questions. Each participant's complete interview can be found in Appendix E. The major themes that emerged from my interviews were:

- Students' Misconceptions about AP Classes,
- Fear of Failing and Stress,
- Lack of Encouragement from Teachers and Guidance Counselors, and
- Not Wanting to Stand Out.

Theme 1: Limited Knowledge about Advanced Placement and Gifted Program

Four of the five participants held various types of misconceptions about Advanced Placement courses and the gifted program. When asked to describe what type of students took AP classes, James answered, "The really smart kids." He also mentioned that there was great deal of homework and the grading scale was different for AP students than for regular education classes. All five of the participants shared that they had few or no Black friends who were taking AP classes, intimating that AP classes were not for Black students.

Of the five students, three had been tested for the gifted program while in elementary school. However, only Jamal made it into the program. All five participants have taken one or more Honors or Accelerated class while in high school. Jamal was the only participant who had taken any AP classes.

The most prolific misconception about AP courses was there wasn't much difference between AP classes and Honors and Accelerated courses. Andrea stated that she often wondered what it was they did in AP classes that differed from her Accelerated and Honors classes.

Andrea: That's what I always wondered, because when I, when I can really sit here and say, like, me any friends, we check our grades every day in computer apps, and she shows me her grades; I show her my grades. To me, I just feel like the work is just more in-depth. Like, there no other way to put it. Like, I don't feel like they get more.

Researcher: When you look at what your friends are doing in AP classes, and what you're doing, do you see – are they doing a lot of busy work, or—what are the novels? The novels for example?

Andrea: Um, we actually did a paper similar to theirs. That's why it kind of confuses me when they throw the title of AP on top, like on top of it. It's like Honors work combined with AP work. So, to me, they can go hand-to-hand also. It's just, your statement, like taking one step more.

Sean believed that taking AP classes would not have made a difference in graduating from high school.

Researcher: When do you start getting to choose your... the AP classes?

Sean: In your, um, ending of sophomore year, so you can choose in your, in your junior and senior year.

Researcher: Do you have to have a teacher recommendation?

Sean: Yes. You have to have an interview with them.

Researcher: Okay, and did you go through that process?

Sean: I did not.

Researcher: How come?

Sean: Because I really... I didn't really think it would make a difference, because, . . . um...

Researcher: You didn't think the AP classes would make a difference?

Sean: with me graduating.

Researcher: Okay. So your goal was to just get graduated?

Sean: Yes.

Researcher: All right. But now if a teacher had recommended you, do you think that you probably would've considered it?

Sean: I would have.

James explained that his reasoning for not choosing AP classes were related to his sister's input. James' older sister had taken AP classes while in high school and was in her final year in college. She did not see much difference in the AP classes and her Honors and Accelerated classes.

Researcher: Now when she and you talk about school, I'm sure y'all talk about school, has she talked to you about taking any AP classes?

James: Yes ma'am.

Researcher: And what does she have to say? I'm curious.

James: Well, she, she said she's always known me to be smart—

Researcher: Mm-hm.

James: --in school. And that, that it's really not that big of an issue for the classes I'm taking now.

Researcher: Oh, she's saying that they're, they're not that different?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Um, is, did that have anything to do with why you didn't – chose not to take-

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: So, in other words, what you're saying is that she's doing okay— did she take Advanced Placement classes when she was in high school?

James: Yes, Ma'am.

Researcher: Oh, she did. Okay. And so, from her experience, she's saying they're not much different. What do you think she means by that,

not much different? That they're about the same as the advance classes, or they're not much harder? Or the—

James: Like, she said, when she said it, she just, she seems like she knew how smart I was, and she knew it was going to be some easy work. That I could be able – I would've been able to do - - with no problem.

For James, his sister's experiences carried a lot of weight in his considering taking AP classes. Although AP classes are thought to be more rigorous and carry a higher point value in a student's overall GPA, James' sister did not see any tangible benefits for herself. She felt that she would have been just as prepared for college if she had not taken any AP classes. She also informed James that there wasn't much difference between the AP classes and the Honors and Accelerated classes.

Lorenzo who had only taken regular education classes in his freshman and sophomore year explained that at the end of his freshman year, he wanted to move up to the Honors and Accelerated classes in his sophomore year but was uneasy as he would have to pass a test in order to qualify.

Lorenzo: I felt put-down; I felt that I, I felt like that I know I could do it if I try and push hard. But I felt disappointed that she didn't think that I could do it.

As a result of not being recommended for Honors or Accelerated classes for his ninth grade year, Lorenzo missed out taking Accelerated Math; a class that includes a full year of ninth grade math along with half a year of tenth grade math.

Lorenzo: Well, in certain classes like math, if you don't start off accelerated in the first, beginning, it's hard to get into math... um, accelerated class, because like, if you take 'cause the first year you take Math I and Math II. So the next year they'll take a different, they'll take a

different, different course. So, like, it's hard, it's very hard to get in once you're already started.

Researcher: That's what I've heard. Yup.

Lorenzo: It was just kind of hard. But I, I like, I love math, and I always kept an A average in math. I had a B maybe once or twice. I never got too low in math though.

Researcher: So were you able to get into the accelerated math program in the 10th grade?

Lorenzo: No, not in math.

Jamal, the only participant who has taken any AP classes also believes that there is no significant difference in the Honors/Accelerated classes and AP classes.

Researcher: When you are looking at your advanced literature class that you're taking right now, and you talk to, maybe, the kids that are taking the AP class.. and you said that your teacher is the same teacher that's teaching both class. Do you think the course work... do you hear anything about how the coursework is different or more rigorous?

Jamal: Um, the students that I've talked to, they've said it's the same work. They're like, "If you can do honors, you can do AP. The only difference is, like, for the entire year, we have maybe ten books that we have to read and write essay about. They have 15 for example.

Although Jamal wanted to take the AP literature class he is referring to, he was uncertain if he would be successful because his mother pointed out to him that literature was his least favorite subject and he was a huge procrastinator. After much deliberation over the summer, Jamal and his mother went to the school before school began to get his schedule changed from Accelerated literature to AP literature. He was told it could not be done because he had waited too long.

Jamal: But I decided not to take AP literature.

Researcher: Okay. Can you tell me about that?

Jamal: Um, not because of the people, not because I wasn't comfortable with the other students, but because I wasn't comfortable with my own abilities in Language Arts. Last year, I was able to maintain a high A in all of the – I meant each nine weeks.

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Jamal: Each semester. But something just—actually, I wanted to take it, but my mom didn't think that it would be a good idea because, out of all my courses, Language Arts has always been the – my least favorite. I mean, I'm able to keep an A in it, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything.

Researcher: Why do you have trouble with literature, or Language Arts? Is it because you just, it's just not interesting to you, or –

Jamal: It's not really interesting, and also, I don't do well with timeframes. I can't – well, I can, it's just, I don't know. And not just with school, like, it's tough for me to write an essay in a time period. But it's also tough for me –like, outside of school, if you give a time limit on something, I'm going to push it, I'm going to be the—

Researcher: Are you a procrastinator?

Jamal: Big time. Big time. And, um, in all my classes, I'm the last one to finish tests.

Researcher: Now, because you didn't choose the AP Literature in 11th grade, can you pick it up in January when, when you go back after Christmas break, or does that only start once a year, at the beginning of each year?

Jamal: It starts once a year, at the beginning of each year. And like, three weeks before school, after talking with my mom for the entire summer, I was telling her I could handle it, I should do it. It will help me in the long run.

Researcher: Right.

Jamal: She was like, "Okay. If you think you can do, then go for it."

Researcher: Okay.

- Jamal:** We went to the um, school –
- Researcher:** Yeah...
- Jamal:** --and they wouldn't let me. They were like, "It's too late."
- Jamal:** So a whole year in Honors instead of AP is wasted because they couldn't...because of a formality.
- Researcher:** Now, the person that you talked to about that, was it the guidance counselor?
- Jamal:** I talked with the principal of curriculum and the guidance counselor for 10th and 11th grade.
- Researcher:** And they just flat-out said no?
- Jamal:** I talked to the lady who teaches the course also... who is also...she teaches Honors, which I'm in now. And she teaches the AP.
- Researcher:** And has she... and she, she said it just wasn't a possibility? Were they just overrun with students?
- Jamal:** Actually, the Honors class has, like, 35 kids in it. And the AP has 14.
- Researcher:** Oh!
- Jamal:** So, yeah. The Honors class that I'm in now is overflowing. Um, kids are sitting in chairs, because there's not enough desks. But they couldn't let me go to the AP class because I didn't, I didn't sign up in time.

Jamal's frustration when explaining why he was not allowed to register for AP literature was palpable and understandable. Like many of his gifted peers, Jamal was aware acutely of how power in the schools is used to circumvent his success. He had "grown critical" (Ford, 2011) of the institution that is purportedly designed to help him. When pressed further to describe the differences he and his friends have observed in

comparing AP Literature and the Honors Literature class Jamal was taking, Jamal conceded that the students in the AP class are afforded more ownership in their learning.

Jamal: So they just have more books. And they said that they have more say – so, they have more of a voice in the class. Like, she’ll ask them, “Okay, do you think - - do y’all think that y’all will be ready for a vocab. test Tuesday, or should we push it till Thursday?” They can choose when they want to test. Whereas she treats us like a high school class, where she’s like - - well, she tells us everything, and we sit there and listen. We don’t choose our test dates. We don’t choose what our homework should be.

The misconception that there isn’t any difference between Honors/Accelerated and AP classes plays a significant role in the minds of many eligible students when deciding their coursework in high school. Andrea, Sean, and James were significantly influenced by their peers and family member’s viewpoint concerning AP classes.

Lorenzo had to fight to move from regular education classes into Honors and Accelerated classes in his Grade 10 year commented that while in the Accelerated Government class, his class and the regular education Government students received the same study guide and same test. Jamal, the only participant who had taken AP classes reported that he did not see any significant difference between his Grade 11 Honors Literature class and the AP Literature class in which he wanted to enroll.

Although the students expressed the belief that there may not be any significant difference between AP and Honors, Accelerated, and Advanced classes, they were savvy enough to discern the advantages of the AP classes to their future educational pursuits. Several of them during the course of our interview, expressed regret that they did not pursue AP classes and would have done things differently.

Researcher: Now, do you think that those kids that are taking the AP classes, do you think they'll be better prepared than you, to tackle college classes when they leave high school?

James: Yes, ma'am.

When James was further probed as to why he believed the students taking AP classes would be better prepared than students like him who took only regular and Advanced classes, he cited it was the "big workload that they have and all that homework." Towards the end of our interview James remarked that in light of our conversation, he would seriously consider taking an AP class in his senior year. Andrea expressed the same sentiment when asked if AP classes would prepare her better for college.

Andrea: And I was like, well, I want to go ahead and do that. Maybe it will better prepare me for college. And you know, now, if you pass the AP test that they, that they give you at the end of that, um, semester, um, it could actually, possibly count for college credit. And so I'm thinking, oh, that'll be so good!

When asked what advice she would give to Black students who were wavering in deciding to take AP classes, Andrea summed it up with an upbeat reflection.

Andrea: I would tell them, like, not to be afraid to go into something, um - - give it a try. I would, now that I, like, see it for myself that it's - - that the work is not much harder, like, than, like, what I was doing. And it makes me mad that I didn't. But at the same time, I can't beat myself up 'cause I didn't do it. I still have many, many years ahead of me.

Researcher: Right. Mm-hm.

Andrea: Um, but I would definitely say give it a try. And once you give it a try, and you see that you're really, really struggling, then take a step out. And just do down. And just, if you feel like you can't do it, then that's what it is.

Although Sean did not participate in AP classes, he was aware of the advantages that the coursework would provide.

Researcher: Do you think the kids that took the AP classes – that they might have an edge over you, since their course work.

Sean: Yeah, they have an advantage, they have advantages to get into colleges.

Researcher: And what would those advantages be, do you think?

Sean: I guess it would give them a head-start on college life and – not life but education and all that- so they're, they'll be, they'll be more prepared for college.

Researcher: Now you're a senior and you're about to graduate, looking back now, as a senior, and knowing what you know, would you - - do you think you would make the same decisions about taking AP classes?

Sean: I think I would've taken them just to prove to other people that you can do whatever you want, no matter what color you are.

Lorenzo, who has not taken any AP classes and had to petition his teacher to recommend him to take accelerated courses in his junior year, also spoke of his regret in not taking AP classes.

Lorenzo: If you think that you can do, recommend yourself, and believe in yourself, and know that you can do it. Don't doubt yourself because of what a teacher had said, or what you may have heard. If you feel the knowledge that you think you can do it, pursue it, and go on with it. Don't just give up because the teacher told you that it may be hard. Everything's not easy in life, so you just have to work hard and go for it.

Researcher: That sounds like good advice. Are you going to take it yourself? Maybe think about taking some more advanced classes?

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: In your senior year?

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am. I think I will go up and recommend myself for accelerated math class for next year.

For Jamal, there was never any doubt that he would take AP courses once he entered high school. All gifted students automatically are registered for honors, and accelerated courses. Parents can override the student's or recommendations of the school. Students also have the opportunity to opt out, but few do.

Jamal: But for me, there wasn't a choice. I always knew - - like, from the beginning of eighth grade, I knew that I wanted to take all of the advance classes – all of the honors classes - - that's where I felt I needed to be.

Researcher: And is that because it fell right in line with your ultimate goal, which was to go, to go to medical school? And also because you feel comfortable in that, that framework with those kids, and that type of rigorous type of coursework?

Jamal: Well, for me, it really didn't have anything to do with other students, or feeling comfortable. It's mainly because I know that, in order to get where I want to be, like with my career goal. Then I need to be in AP classes. So it was all about the actual, the actual courses, and how it would look on college applications.

Theme Two: Fear of Failure and Stress

The second theme that became evident from my interviews with the students was the fear of failing AP classes coupled with the issue of stress associated with the workload of AP coursework. Jamal, the only participant with any experience with AP classes, initially elected not to take AP Literature because he was concerned that his writing skills were not up to par and he would not do well in the class. Andrea, likewise was concerned about her writing ability.

Andrea: We took a writing test. And back then, my writing wasn't as good. But now, I feel strong about my writing—um, but back then, my writing wasn't good.

Andrea described for me how her self-doubt, coupled with her guidance counselor's skepticism caused her to reevaluate her plans to enroll in AP classes.

Andrea: ...and she went off of that. So, whatever you wrote, it was based to use in your interview. And she was like, "You're borderline." So therefore, it had me thinking, I don't want to flunk out. But I kept thinking, my score and stuff says, you know, I'm borderline. I mean, I could potentially fail, I'm thinking.

Andrea: I was like, "Mom, do you think I should go in?" She was like, "I don't want you to have to kill yourself." And she was like, "I'm proud of you as of right now." I had one friend, she took AP classes throughout her whole school year. She actually goes to Spellman now.

Researcher: Oh, cool!

Andrea: And she was like, "You can do it, Andrea. You can do it, 'cause you always that person that does your work, you don't procrastinate."

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Andrea: But, I stopped, and I—from that point on, I just never went in on trying to do AP classes. Cause I was scared—

Researcher: You were scared.

Andrea: That I was going to flunk out.

In addition to the fear of failing AP classes, Andrea also expressed concern about maintaining her GPA, the work load AP students' carry, and the stress she witnessed friends undergoing who were taking AP classes.

Andrea: I really don't want to flunk. 'Cause, for me, trying to keep a grade up, you can make a grade, but it's hard to keep a grade.

Researcher: Yeah.

Andrea: That's always been, like my motto, kind of. You can make a grade—you can, like, anybody can make a 100, but it's hard to maintain it. So, I was like, I've gotten this far, why, why just make one jump, when I can continue on, and just graduate, and without stress. That was another factor: I didn't want stress.

Researcher: You were worried about the stress?

Andrea: Yes, ma'am. I had one friend, like she was really crying. And she was like, "Andrea, I don't know how I'm going to do this, like we have four books to read over the summer."

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Andrea: She was like, "I'm starting to second-guess why did I get myself into this?" And I was like, I don't want the stress. I don't want to have to stress that hard about school, like, mm-m.

James also expressed a concern about the work load required of AP classes. When asked to describe the type of reputation AP classes might have that would cause him to not participate in them, James cited the work load and the type of kids who took them.

James: ... like there's really a lot of work. And some of the people, the kids in there are kind of boring.

Researcher: The kids, themselves, are kind of on the boring side?

James: Yes, ma'am. Just, just do a lot of work in there.

Researcher: Do you know any of the kids, um, personally, that take AP classes? Any of your close friends take AP classes?

James: No, ma'am.

Researcher: No? Any acquaintances that you know—just, kinda' like kids passing in the hallway that you might say hi to—take AP classes?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Al righty. And so do you ever chit-chat with them about what they're doing?

James: No, ma'am. I just always hear them in class; they complain about it. It's just a lot of work.

Researcher: Yeah.

James: And, and it, it's a different grading, kind of, system.

Researcher: Yeah. What, what makes an A in, uh, AP classes? Is it 93-100? Or is it still a 90-100?

James: Ninety-three.

Researcher: All right. And right now you're making all A's and B's in your classes, right? So, you're not afraid, you're in Honor classes, is that right? Which are considered as Advanced classes

Researcher: So, what's the workload like for you, in the Advance class? How are you doing? How are you managing?

James: I'm doing fine. It's, it's really easy.

Researcher: It's really easy?

James: Mm-hm. You listen to the teachers. That's all. That'll do.

Researcher: Do you have to put a lot of homework time in, on the weekends or in the evening?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: You do? Okay. 'Bout – what would you say, on average, you, you commit yourself to on the week or the weekends?

James: About no more than hour.

Researcher: An hour each night?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Okay, and that's for, like, for all three subjects—I think you take three classes a day, or four classes a day?

James: Four.

Researcher: You take four academic classes a day, and then when you go home, in about an hour you have all your homework knocked out?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: What do you think the AP kids spend on their homework, per night?

James: Like a couple of hours to, like, complete it, to, like the perfection that the teachers ask for. Like, writing a paper. They have to get, get the papers they write--- if they get, like, one little thing wrong, they take off so many points, maybe over ten points.

When I examined James' transcript, I noted that he was not registered for any Advance classes. He did, however, take Accelerated Chemistry in his Grade year. It was disconcerting to me that James, who had an overall GPA of 87%, spent only an hour per night on completing homework. It was obvious, through his admission that James was working well below his potential. He said, "I'm doing fine. It's really easy."

In contrast, Sean, who also did not enroll in any AP classes, was not concerned about the academic challenges or workload that AP classes might present.

Researcher: Now your Honors classes that you take right now, are they pretty challenging, or are they pretty simple for you?

Sean: Pretty simple.

Researcher: That's amazing. So you just kind of—would you say you just kind of—you're just getting, I mean you're not getting by, because you're making all A's and B's, but it's not hard work for you?

Sean: Mm-m. No, not hard at all.

Researcher: Alright, so the fear of working hard—the fear of working hard is not what kept you from taking AP classes?

Sean: Oh no, not at all.

Sean, like James, found his classes extremely easy and not rigorously challenging.

Theme Three: Lack of Encouragement from Teachers and Guidance Counselors

The third theme that emerged from my interviews with the participants was perception concerning the lack of involvement from their guidance counselor. Of the five participants, Andrea was the only one whose guidance counselor broached the subject of AP classes, while Sean was the only participant who had a teacher to suggest AP classes. Lorenzo, who enjoyed math and wanted to be in Accelerated Math in Grade 9, was enrolled in general math instead. In his Grade 10 year, Lorenzo was recommended by two teachers to take Accelerated classes in science and history. James also took general education classes, with the exception of the one Accelerated science class in Grade 11. Jamal, having been identified as gifted from elementary school, automatically was enrolled in Honors, Accelerated, and Advanced classes as a Grade 9 and Grade 10 student. With the one exception of being denied entry into AP Literature in Grade 11 due to a technicality, Jamal received no pushback from teachers or guidance counselors when he was making his AP selections.

Researcher: And, did any of your teachers recommend you for the Honors classes or the accelerated classes for Grade 9?

Lorenzo: No, ma'am. My math teacher, she was going to recommend me, but she told me no, let me see how it was, and then maybe I could, you know, move up. But none of my teachers recommended for ...

Researcher: Do you feel like you could have done the math?

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: --if you had been put in the class?

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Um, when they told you that—when the math teacher told you that—how did you react and respond to that?

Lorenzo: I felt put-down. I felt that I, I felt like that I know I could do it if I try and push hard. But I felt disappointed that she didn't think that I could do it.

Researcher: And did you recommend yourself? Did you go speak to the counselor?

Lorenzo: No, ma'am. I just, just went with what the teachers said.

Researcher: And how did your mom respond to it? What did she—did she get involved in any way? Did you share with her what the teacher had said?

Lorenzo: No, ma'am. I didn't share it with her. I just listened to what the teacher said and did the regular classes.

Kubitscheck and Hallinan in their article, *Tracking and Student's Friendships* (1998) found that “few students change their placement from that recommended by teachers and counselors” (p. 13). Therefore, it is not surprising that four of the participants in my study did not challenge the teachers or guidance counselors' recommendations.

Although Lorenzo was aware that not taking the Accelerated Math class in Grade 9 would cause him to be ineligible for any Honors or Accelerated math classes in Grade 10, he chose to heed his teacher's advice. He described for me his Grade 10 year, the factors that went into his decision making concerning his class choices and what kept him from seeking Accelerated and Honors classes.

Researcher: And then, Grade's coming to an end and you start planning for grade 10. Tell me what ensued in your preparations for Grade 10.

Lorenzo: Well, in certain classes like math, if you don't start off Accelerated in the first beginning, it's hard to get into math—um, Accelerated class, because—like, if you take – 'cause the first year you take math I and math II. So the next year they'll take a different, they'll

take a different, different course. So, like, it's hard, it's very hard to get in once you're already started.

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Lorenzo: It was just kind of hard, so. But I, -- I like, I love math, and I always kept an A average in math. It never -- I had a B maybe once or twice. Never got too low in math though. But—

Researcher: So were you able to get into the Accelerated math program in Grade 10?

Lorenzo: No, not in math.

Researcher: When kids disagree with guidance counselors and teachers' recommendations, what recourse do you have? In other words, where can you go and -- do you have the opportunities to go and speak to somebody else? Do you have any options?

Lorenzo: Yeah, you, like, the guidance counselor, once you prepare for your classes, they ask you, "Do you want to stay in Accelerated, or do you want to recommend putting yourself in Accelerated? Or such-and-so?" As you go to the --, you go to the guidance counselor and talk to her, and see what she does. And once you recommend yourself for the classes, they make you take a test.

Researcher: Oh!

Lorenzo: Whether you -- and it depends on what your average is on the test, whether they'll put you in the class or not.

Researcher: Oh! So did you do that? Did you—

Lorenzo: No, ma'am. I just, just kept it—kept going with the flow.

Researcher: Why?

Lorenzo: I don't know. I just never thought about it, like, going up there and trying to do it and—I know I could do it, but, you know, there's a -- where you're a little nervous, or don't know should you do it or should you not do it.

Researcher: It must be a tough place to be in. Did you talk to any of your friends that were in Accelerated classes? To see what it was like? Did y'all compare homework assignments, or ...

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am. It's basically the same thing. You just move faster. And, like I knew that I could move faster than and comprehend what the teachers—but I never went up there and recommended myself.

As Lorenzo was sharing this experience with me, I observed that he had begun to slump down in his chair and his voice and his demeanor became very solemn. I recalled reading from his survey that he was taking an Accelerated course. As he began to talk about this class, he once again became animated.

Researcher: So the end of Grade 10 comes. You've had two years of regular education classes. And you've told me that you're taking some Accelerated classes.

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Tell me about that, and how you made the decision to get into those classes.

Lorenzo: Well, my Grade 10 year, my teachers recommended – both, two of my teachers recommended for me to be in Accelerated classes.

Researcher: Ah hah! Tell me about that. What subjects were they?

Lorenzo: Chemistry and government.

Researcher: Chemistry is a butt-kicker.

Lorenzo: Yes. But, like, the first beginning of the year, I kept a high, high B. And the next semester I had an A all throughout the semester.

Researcher: Awesome!

Lorenzo: And that, that showed her that I could work better and do it. So she recommended me for physics.

Researcher: And not only showed her, but showed –

Lorenzo: Myself.

Researcher: Yourself. Yes. Absolutely!

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: You're smiling when you're saying this.

Lorenzo: (Laughing) Yep. And like, government teacher - I kept an A throughout all year. And when I took an exam, I made a good grade. And she saw that I, also could do it, too. So she recommended me for Accelerated U.S. History.

Although Lorenzo missed out on the opportunity to enroll in the Accelerated math classes in Grades 9 and 10 due to his teacher's lack of recommendation, his situation reversed itself at the end of his Grade 10 year. Both his science and social studies teachers recognized his potential and recommended him for Accelerated classes for his Grade 10 year. His success in both of these classes, along with the recognition and validation from his teachers had a profoundly positive effect on Lorenzo. With a renewed confidence, Lorenzo was able to register for two additional Accelerated classes for his Grade 11 year.

Lorenzo: But, like, now we're going into a new semester. You go to a guidance counselor, and you, uh—they ask you do you want to stay in the classes, do you want to move yourself down, or you can go up there to the guidance yourself, and tell them that you want to be moved down.

Researcher: So about once a year, the guidance counselors check on you to see how you're feeling, and are you comfortable? And at that time, if you wanted, if you had been in a regular education class, could you have moved up?

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am. I would have to take a test.

Researcher: The test.

Lorenzo: Yes ma'am.

Researcher: Right, you'd have to take that test. But this time, in order to take these two Accelerated classes, the physics and the government,

you didn't have to take a test because were recommended by the teacher.

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: So you were able to bypass –

Lorenzo: The test.

Lorenzo shared that he because he had been successful in his current Accelerated classes; he was planning on enrolling in two Accelerated classes for his senior year.

James shared with me that, like Lorenzo, no guidance counselor had ever introduced the topic of Advanced, Accelerated, Honors, or AP classes with him. None of James' teachers ever broached the subject either.

Researcher: Alright. So have – you ever been recommended by any teachers for AP classes?

James: No, ma'am.

Researcher: Hmm, but you have a really high GPA. Your GPA is about 3.4, isn't it?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Alright. So, why do you suppose a teacher hasn't recommended you to take those classes, when clearly you, it shows that you can do the work, and that you want to do the work? Why do you suppose none of your tenth-grade teachers may've recommended you?

James: I don't know.

Researcher: When you sit down to select your classes in the tenth grade for the upcoming school year—for your junior year. You sit with your counselor, is that correct?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Okay. And did your counselor talk with you, or broach the subject of AP classes with you?

James: No, ma'am.

Researcher: Alright. Um, and what about you? Did you have any desire to take an AP classes?

James: I didn't really, I didn't really think about AP classes.

Researcher: Did you know about them? Did you, did you know—

James: I knew about some of, some of them.

Researcher: Did you know for example, that an AP class carries more weight on your GPA than a regular Honors class does?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: Okay. And that didn't sway you to want to choose any of the AP classes?

James: (*Slowly*). It did. I, I just didn't know w-what the classes were for the next year though.

Researcher: Do you think the guidance counselors and the teachers here at school do enough to encourage Black kids to take their AP classes?

James: No, ma'am.

Researcher: No. So, no one took you to the side, or your guidance counselor didn't say, "Yo, James, look at this GPA you have right here, and look at your CRCT scores, and your benchmark scores. You really could be doing AP?" So you made the decision, and they just kind of went along with it?

James: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: There was no encouragement from anyone here at school?

James: No, ma'am.

Without any encouragement from his teachers and guidance counselors, it was understandable why James felt hesitant about enrolling in any Accelerated or AP classes. With his high GPA and very few outside detractors such as a part time job or

extracurricular activities that might interfere with his studies, James would be an excellent candidate for Accelerated and AP classes.

Sean also relayed that the only faculty member to suggest he should consider an AP class was a teacher. However, a negative experience with his Grade Honors Literature teacher influenced his decision not to enroll in AP classes.

Sean: We would do projects and papers, and I would think that my paper would be good, just as good as everybody else, but I'd have a lower grade than everybody else. And I'd have my white friends that read it and say, "Hey, this is good." But I got a lower grade.

Researcher: And so did you ever approach her and ask her for any clarification? How did she treat you – did she, uh, not call on you or did she – was she dismissive in class? What was her body language like?

Sean: It wasn't really – I don't want to call it racist (pause) but it seemed like she wasn't as fond as, as –of me as the other kids.

Researcher: So, when, you experienced that with her, did any of that, do you think influenced your decision not to pursue AP classes?

Sean: It kind of did, in a way.

For Sean, and many minority students, the constant battle of coping “with the dual stressors of academic challenge and negative stereotypes about their group” (Graham & Anderson, 2008, p. 475) from their teachers can often lead to disengagement. Although Sean was aware that AP classes were more rigorous, held a higher GPA weight, and would better prepare him for college, he chose to remain in less challenging courses.

Andrea described for me how as a Grade 10 student, she went from elation when told she was eligible for AP classes in Grade 11 to despair and self-doubt after speaking with her guidance counselor.

- Andrea:** If I can remember, I think my guidance counselor came in and she was like, um, when it came time to review schedules and all that you want to take for your 11th grade year, she was like, “Now you’re all at the opportunity of where you do AP classes.”
- Researcher:** Mm-hm.
- Andrea:** And you know, now, if you pass the AP test that they, that they give you at the end of that, um, semester, um, it could actually possibly count for college credit.
- Researcher:** Oh wow!
- Andrea:** And so I’m thinking, oh, that’ll be so good!
- Researcher:** Yeah.
- Andrea:** So, um, I went in—
- Researcher:** So you were psyched!
- Andrea:** Yeah!
- Researcher:** ‘Cause you want to get ahead.
- Andrea:** Yes, Ma’am. And so, I went to an interview—you had to schedule an interview with the counselor and talk about all that. And she was like, “Andrea, you really are—you know, you have what it takes to do the, the um, do the class. But you um, have to...” I think it was, I’m trying to remember it was a test we took, even though it wasn’t even that long ago. I want to think, uh, oh yea, we took a writing test. And back then, my writing wasn’t as good. But now, I feel strong my writing—um, but back then, my writing wasn’t good. And so when I took the—if I want, I want to say it was a practice test—
- Researcher:** Mm-hm
- Andrea:** And she went off of that. So, whatever you wrote, it was based to use in your interview. And she was like, “You’re borderline.” She was like, um, “You have what it takes, but, um, you’re borderline.”
- Andrea:** And I talked to her, and she was like, “You can do it, um, but just be mindful that if you flunk in all of this, you’re going to have to retake.” And I’m just like, oh God! So I just thought, I was, like, I

don't want to have to go down that road and get behind. So I stopped myself. I don't—some people ask me, do you regret, like not taking those classes? I was like, no, I mean, I still have the opportunity to – when I get to college—to take them.

Researcher: Mm-hm. Right.

Andrea: But, I stopped, and I – from that point on, I just never went in on trying to do AP classes. 'Cause I was scared—

Researcher: You were scared.

Andrea: That I was going to flunk out.

Andrea recalls how a year later, when contemplating registering for AP classes for Grade 12, the guidance counselor's warning still resonated in her mind.

Andrea: And she will tell you, if you're on track for, you know, going to the next grade. You're on track for credits, and all that. And, um, it's a list; you have the opportunity to try to take it. Like the AP.

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Andrea: Um, but I still chose not to, 'cause I, I always had that—

Researcher: You still thinking about what—

Andrea: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: --the counselor had said at the end of Grade 10. .

Andrea: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: So what the counselor—the counselor's perspective—

Andrea: Yeah, it—

Researcher: --really had a lot of – carried a lot of weight—

Andrea: Yes, ma'am.

Researcher: --in your mind. And you just were not able to shake it?

Andrea: But ever since, whenever she said, “Just think hard about it before you take these classes, because I don’t want you to flunk.” That’s what she kept saying. I was like, I’m thinking, and I was really, don’t want to flunk. ‘Cause, for me, trying to keep a grade up, you can make a grade, but it’s hard to keep a grade.

It is obvious that students depend heavily upon their teachers and guidance counselors in shaping their course selection. The implication is that as the de facto gatekeepers of class schedules and course work, choices, many capable Black students are left out of the AP equation.

Theme Four: Not Wanting to Stand Out: Awareness of Race

The final theme that emerged from my interviews with the participants was their awareness of race and how it intersected with their choice to enroll in AP courses. Four of the five participants conveyed their apprehension about being a minority within a minority if they chose to take AP classes. Jamal, the only participant to take AP classes and the only participant who was identified as gifted was not concerned about being a minority in his class because “the Black kids push me over the line, and now I’m a White kid – to them and to the White people.” From the very beginning of his school career, Jamal felt ostracized by his Black friends when they learned he had been accepted into the gifted program.

Jamal: Okay, because of my intelligence and the special treatment that I received, I was bullied. In the school, on the bus. Definitely on the bus.

Researcher: How did you handle that?

Jamal: At first I used to let it get to me a lot.

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Jamal: Uh, okay, because I didn't talk, like, the kids that were bullying me, because I didn't act the same way as them, they, uh, immediately resulted to calling me names, like "gay", and "faggot". And just because I didn't use the same – because I didn't talk like them, because I didn't act like them, because I didn't hang out with them, because they didn't know me. That was their way of belittling me so that I didn't – well, I guess that was their way of trying to put me in my place.

Jamal: And, I mean, it affected me, psychologically. I mean, even today. But, I mean, I just kind of, I don't know, I found ways to move past it. And, I mean, in a way it turned me, I guess, cold, like bitter. I became mean, and like, I don't know, it was my way of coping. So I don't get hurt.

Researcher: Yeah. Yeah, that was your coping mechanism. When you were going through this, was it, was it Black kids that were giving you a hard time? Was it White kids?

Jamal: Black kids. The White kids were understanding. I mean, they were the ones in Quest with me. And even the ones that weren't in Quest, they didn't view me, really, as a –

Researcher: As a threat?

Jamal: Well, yeah. They didn't view me as a threat. So I guess the Black kids that were not in Quest (gifted program) viewed me as a threat. They thought, um, I guess it hit them close to home, seeing me being successful; seeing me get to do things that they, as Black kids, could not do.

As Jamal moved through middle school and into high school, he became further estranged from his Black peers and more socially involved with his White gifted and non-gifted peers.

Jamal: I mean, even to this day, all of my friends are White, except maybe two or three. I mean, that's who I feel comfortable with. I mean, I guess after being with them for so long, it just kind of –

Researcher: It seems very natural, I'm sure. Because it's safe, like you said, it's safe. And that's—those are the people that you've grown up with all this time. So that makes total sense to me.

In her book, *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, & Acting White After Brown* (2011), Tyson posits that high achieving Black students who rise to the top in schools that use visible tracking often are targets of “of resentment and animosity among other black students” (p. 125). Several of the students shared that they had few or no Black friends taking AP classes. Sean explained that most of the AP classes consist of White students and he did not want to be the only Black guy in an AP class full of White students.

Researcher: Was there a reason other than you didn’t think it was going to make a difference? Were there, were there any apprehensions on your part that might’ve kept you from making that decision?

Sean: Uh, really, honestly, (long pause) because I didn’t want to be like the only Black kid in the class, ‘cuz you kind of stand out when you are.

Researcher: So, is there some kind of phenomena that - - is there some kind of uh, I don’t want to say “stigma”, but is there some sort of undercurrent rule that the AP classes are just for the White kids?

Sean: Mm-m

Researcher: No? But yet you said you didn’t want to be...

Sean: ..the only...

Researcher: ...the only black kid.

Sean: ...Black guy in there.

Researcher: And, what would that be like if you were the only Black guy in an AP class? What do you think it would be like?

Sean: I, I would feel like, since I’m the only Black one in there, they would be looking at me like I’m not supposed to be in here, and I should go, basically, to the regular, uh, classes with all my other friends who are other colors.

Rather than endure social isolation and alienation in the classroom, Sean instead elected to remain in his Honors and Accelerated classes knowing he was receiving less rigorous work and would be less prepared than his peers who participated in AP. Sean, like several of the participants in this study, has a heightened awareness of social injustice. They are well aware and have “grow [n] critical and wary of the meritocratic ideology promoted in schools, and are cognizant of race, class, and gender prejudice and discrimination in school” (Ford, 2011, p. 9). For Sean, choosing to remain in Honors and Accelerated classes was the best and only choice given that he would have felt like an outsider in the AP classes.

Lorenzo shared his feelings about his presence in Honors classes. While proud that he made it into the more challenging classes, he was however, plagued by feelings of uncertainty and his acceptance among the mostly White students. In his Honors Government class, he was only one of three Black students.

Researcher: How was that to be only one of three in, in that class?

Lorenzo: I mean, makes you feel like you, that – it just makes you feel better about yourself.

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Lorenzo: But then, like, you think about your friends and what they’re doing, and should they be in the classes or not. But it makes you think, like, hmmm, should I be in here or should I not? I mean—

Researcher: What do you think causes you to doubt yourself?

Lorenzo: Um, it’s mostly, like, you don’t have as much, many as race as yourself in the class, so you feel like you’re not wanted in the class, or you shouldn’t be in the class because you’re not—you don’t feel welcome with the other students that you don’t usually associate with or maybe just talk to on a regular basis.

Researcher: So stepping out of your comfort zone is a concern—

Lorenzo: Yes.

Researcher: --when you're going into the AP classes, or the Advanced classes?

Lorenzo: Yes, ma'am.

It is not surprising; therefore, that the majority of the students interviewed said they had few or no Black friends taking AP classes. All students who considered enrolling in higher level classes were concerned with the challenge and rigorousness of the course work. Tyson (2011) argued that Black students who had few friends in AP classes may opt out because “the course load and work in advanced classes is challenging enough without the additional stress of social isolation” (p. 161). This was true for Sean, who, with a GPA of 93, had no concerns about the academic challenges of AP classes but was not willing to endure social isolation.

Researcher: So the fear of working hard—the fear of working hard is not what kept you from taking AP classes?

Sean: Oh no, not at all.

Sean: I don't feel like I would be happy in those classes. I would feel like an outcast. I just didn't want to put myself through that.

Juxtaposed with the apprehension of being a minority within a minority in AP classes, several of the participants discussed the phenomena of “acting white” due to their academic achievement.

Jamal: When they refer to me and Tanesha, they're like, they'll say things like—even the White kids that accept us—they'll say things like, “You know, you're not Black.” Or, “You're not a Black kid. You don't act like any of the Black kids.”

Researcher: Oh!

Jamal: Or, I mean, they'll be like—I mean it's their, their, it's their way of telling us that they accept us, but it's, it's not necessarily what you want to hear.

Researcher: Nooooo.

Jamal: We don't want to hear that, "Oh, you're basically a White kid." We want to hear "You're Black, and I still love you."

Researcher: Right

Jamal: Not that, I mean, you know...

Researcher: So, do you think there's a stigma, maybe, perhaps, that Black kids, um, feel that if they are real smart, they might be called a sell-out, or they might be jeopardizing their Blackness with their other friends if they're real smart and they pursue rigorous coursework? Do you think that something that other Black kids might think about?

Jamal: Yes.

Researcher: And, in doing so, they may not pursue the AP classes or the Advanced classes, like you're doing?

Jamal: Yes, uh, one girl that was in Quest with us, at the end of the fifth grade, before we went to middle school, and Quest was over, she quit. She quit Quest so she could stay with all of her friends. Because she knew that, by agreeing to continue with the cohorts that kept all the Quest kids together, she wouldn't have any friends. So she opted to quit and stay with all of her Black friends.

Sean has also experienced being labeled "acting white" and "not Black" by both his White and Black peers.

Researcher: Were you concerned ever about things that's—comments that your Black friends would say if you were in the AP classes? Were you concerned—did that ever play into any of your concerns?

Sean: It do, 'cause like, I would say at least three times a week I have my White friends that tell me that I'm the Whitest Black person they know... then I have some Black friends that say that I don't act Black, so...

Researcher: So that, that's offensive.

Sean: Yes, it is.

Researcher: Yeah, so how do you deal with that?

Sean: I just shrug it off and just keep going and doing—I do what I know—uh, what I'm supposed to do, so that's how I pretty much make it.

Researcher: It must cause you to be frustrated, though, because...

Sean: Kind of, 'cause it's like you're labeling—you're going to label yourself as stupid or not that people that don't listen.

Researcher: Mm-hm. And so it's kind of like you're just kind of stuck right there in the middle?

Sean: Mm-hm.

For most students, high school is a difficult time, for high achieving Black students, such as those in this study, “the experience of racial isolation as well as the messages conveyed through racialized tracking (e.g., advanced classes are “white people” classes) create additional social and emotional challenges” (Tyson, 2011, p. 47). The label “acting White” among Black Americans is a put down and is understandably a term teens in high school would not embrace. Likewise, the term “acting black” also has a pejorative connotation. Jamal described the majority of Black students at his school as fitting into the “stereotypical black person” persona.

Jamal: The stereotype of a Black person at Thurgood High is loud, cussing, sagging their pants, butt hanging out, being disrespectful, not following the rules, um, throwing up gang signs, mmm, being—like, disrupting class, not doing their work, not doing their homework, not turning their homework in, just—but, I mean, you have White people that do that too, but—

Researcher: Mm-hm.

Jamal: But, if White people do that, they're called "wigger".

Researcher: Wigger? What is that?

Jamal: White nigger. And they get ridiculed for trying to be Black, or trying to act Black.

Researcher: Oh, wow! So, for a Black kid who's not fitting into that stereotypical idea of what a Black kid should be like—and I guess—and we're talking about you, I reckon—you must walk a very fine line?

Jamal: Ummmm ... the Black kids push me over the line, and now I'm a White kid—to them and to the White people.

It is not surprising that Jamal, given his view about his Black peers at school, feels more comfortable with White students and has no close Black friends, not even the one or two who are in his AP classes. Fordham (1988) explained that Black students like Jamal, who seek to be academically successful, often feel they must leave their familial environment in exchange for entrance into a dominant society that forces them to adopt a raceless identity.

The familial setting is referred to as "Fictive Kinship" (Fordham, 1988, p. 56), an anthropological concept used by Fordham to describe the kinship, or connection between members of a group within a society, "not related by blood or marriage, who have maintained essential reciprocal social or economic relationships" (Fordham, 1988, p. 56), as well as political. The term, *fictive kinship*, implies a "brotherhood and sisterhood" (Fordham, 1988, p. 56). Fordham further posited that "One can be black in color, but choose not to seek membership.... and one can also be denied membership by the group

because one's behavior, attitudes, and activities are perceived as being at variance with those thought to be appropriated and group-specific, which are culturally patterned and serve to delineate "us from them" (p. 56). Members of this group who choose to deviate from the collective kinship's social identity can adversely risk their position in the fictive kinship group.

This seemed to be the case for Jamal. From the beginning of this school career, Jamal experienced ridicule and isolation from his Black peers, propelling him towards his White classmates, with whom he felt more comfortable in part because of their connection through the gifted program. Jamal explained,

Um, okay, because I didn't talk, like, the kids that were bullying me, because I didn't act the same way as them, they, um, immediately resulted to calling me names, like 'gay' and 'faggot'. And just because I didn't use the same – because I didn't talk like them, because I mean, I guess that was their way of belittling me so that I didn't, well, I guess that was their way of trying to put me in my place. Because they thought that I thought that I was better than them.

In his book, *Kids Don't Want To Fail: Oppositional Culture and the Black-White Achievement Gap*, Harris (2011) concluded that students who adopt a raceless identity in order to achieve academic success may suffer detrimental psychological impairment (p. 132). Jamal stated,

And, I mean, it affected me, psychologically. I mean, even to today. But, I mean, I just kind of, I don't know, I found ways to move past it. And, I mean, in a way it turned me, I guess, cold, like bitter. I became mean, and like, I don't know, it was my way of coping, so I don't get hurt. It'll hurt you.

Researchers point out that while many adolescents face identity issues, Black gifted students, however, must confront two different issues, that of assimilating into the dominant culture or remaining in the fictive kinship of their own culture. Some gifted

Black students such as Jamal decide to “maximize their success potential by minimizing their relationship to the Black community ...and attempt to develop a raceless persona in order to succeed in school and life, they have in essence, become un-Black” (Fordham, 1988, p. 57 -58).

Jamal’s conscious decision to distance himself from his Black peers has exacted a heavy toll on him and affirms what the other participants shared with me as to why they chose not to participate in the AP program. Other students, such as Sean, decide that the alienation from their fictive kinship group is not worth the gain they may receive if they choose to align themselves with a culture in which they will be a minority within a minority.

In their article, *Inside and Outside Gifted Education Programming: Hidden Challenges for African American Students* (2008), researchers, Henfield, Moore, and Wood concluded that many high achieving Black students experience an “educational isolation” (p. 436) because of their minority within a minority status in AP classes. The prospect of experiencing educational isolation plays a significant role in the minds of gifted Black students when choosing their high school courses and for some, can cause them to “not participate in advanced, accelerated, or gifted education programs” (p. 433).

In a study of high achieving students who dropped out of gifted and AP classes, Matthews (2006) found that a significantly higher number of Black male students dropped out of their gifted or AP classes than their White counterparts. The ability to build relationships with their teachers and peers is of paramount importance to the

success of Black students, a dynamic that cannot be ignored when considering the paucity of minority students involved in AP coursework.

Recently, my son Isaiah and I attended an orientation meeting for parents and students who are interested in registering for AP courses for the following school year. As the media center began to fill up, I watched the students and their parents enter and find their seats. I recognized many of my former students in addition to new friends Isaiah has made since entering high school. As the students and parents took their seats, my heart began to sink a little, not one student of color was present other than Isaiah. I counted the number of students in the room, thirty-four in total, a sea of White faces. I glanced over at Isaiah, his coppery brown skin, a tangible contrast to those around him. At that moment, I tried to imagine what it might feel like for Isaiah to be the only Black student in his AP classes next year. How will he navigate the hallways of school, the very institution that I know historically has failed Black students? Will he be able to “negotiate the tension between his academic identity and ethnic identify?” (Graham and Anderson, 2008, p. 473).

Because I am a White woman married to a Black man, and mother of bi-racial children, there have been many times I have been the recipient of disdainful stares, whispers, and inappropriate comments. However, because I am an adult, I have, over the years, acquired the tools to cope with small minded people. Isaiah and other students of color who may find themselves to be a minority within a minority in their AP and gifted classes, do not yet possess in them the same arsenal. Am I asking too much of him? At the age of 15, and about to be a junior next year in high school, Isaiah, like all teenagers,

has struggled with finding his place within the confines of his peer group. Growing up is tough on all kids, even in the best of times, but for Isaiah, being bi-racial, has added an extra component that complicates and blurs an already precarious journey.

I take comfort in the research findings of Bergin and Cooks 2002; Hemmings, 1996; Grantham, 2006; and Sanders, 2006, each of whom have extensively studied high achieving Black students who successfully negotiated academia without having to give up their ethnic identity. Rather than view their quest for academic excellence as “acting white”, the students in these studies chose to use their racial identity “as a source of strength and inspiration” (Graham and Anderson, 2008, p.493). And yet, as I sat there with Isaiah, the comments from the students in my research study began to resonate in my mind. Will he too feel like an outcast, unwelcome, and out of place in his AP classes? Will he, like Jamal, have to become raceless in order to fit in, or will he, like Sean, choose not to participate at all?

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs, 3:5-6)

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to the declining number of African American students in the Gifted and Advanced Placement (AP) Program from the perspective of the students. The perceptions of the participants were sought because too often researchers do not take into account the experiences of the student themselves. As stakeholders in their education, gifted African American students could benefit from a platform, which will allow them to “speak on their own behalf and to offer suggestions, as the true experts on their own experiences” (Thompson, 2002, xx). Excluding the voices and experiences of African American students leaves an incomplete picture of the educational challenges these students encounter on a daily basis.

Jackson and Moore (2006) posited that the caliber of education students receive plays a significant role in their advancement in the work place and society, in general. Therefore, it is imperative that all students who demonstrate the ability to participate in Advanced Placement courses do so as their “choice of academic majors at the college level have broader social and economic implication in the United States” (Moore, 2006, p. 246). In their 8th Annual AP Report to the Nation, The College Board (2012) using the results of the PSAT, reported that 80%, four out of five African American students of the graduating class of 2012 did not take the recommend AP subject. In their report, The College Board (2015) reported, “Black American students in the graduating class of 2013

were the most underrepresented group in the AP classroom” (p. 30). These numbers echoed the underrepresentation of Black students that participate in gifted programs across the nation (Whiting & Ford, 2009). Tyson (2011) concluded in her study that students who were “identified as gifted were significantly more likely to take advanced courses, especially AP courses” (p. 145). Her findings underscored the relationship between gifted education, its process, and the likelihood of choosing AP classes in high school.

In order to obtain the students’ perspectives and better understand their decision not to participate in AP classes, three research questions were used to guide this study.

These questions included:

1. Why are high achieving Black students choosing not to participate in AP classes?
2. How has the history and institution of gifted education aided and excluded Black students?
3. What role do educators have in the decision of Black students who drop out or elect not to participate in Advance Placement classes?

This chapter presents a brief overview of the study, a summary of the findings for each of the research questions, personal challenges I faced as the researcher, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Overview of the Study

This study took place in one Central Georgia High School in Marshall County (a pseudonym), a small rural farming community. The five African American participants in

this study were all members of Thurgood High School (a pseudonym). I contacted Mr. Solomon (a pseudonym), principal of Thurgood High School to ask permission to conduct the study. The participants were chosen through the aid of Mr. Langston (a pseudonym), the college advisor at the high school for the students. Four of the participants were males and one was a female. All of the students had been identified by Mr. Langston as having a GPA of 80% or higher.

I met with each student at their convenience. Most interviews lasted approximately one hour. The questions I used were open-ended and the student's responses were audio taped. I listened and transcribed each interview. Participants were given a copy of their transcribed interview for verification and or correction. Each interview was coded and analyzed for similar themes and patterns. Four themes emerged from my participants' narratives; (1) students held a number of misconceptions about AP classes, (2) students were fearful of failing AP classes and of the workload and stress that AP classes would encompass, (3) students expressed a lack of encouragement from teachers and guidance counselors in contemplating AP, and (4) students were very much aware of being a minority within a minority in AP classes; being the only Black student, or one of just a few in their class.

Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory were used as the frameworks in which to examine the underrepresentation of Black students in the gifted and Advanced Placement courses. Critical Theory allows the researcher to examine social injustices from a reflective lens. This lens empowers oppressed individuals and groups (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2008). The inclusion of Critical Race Theory in my study was relevant

because of the theory's acknowledgement of the difficulties African Americans have endured while pursuing their quest for education within the confines of a dominant White culture.

Responses to Research Questions

As I listened, analyzed, and reflected on the lived experiences of my participants, I found myself immersed in their lives, and acutely aware of their concerns, slights, and goals (Phillion, He, and Connelly 2005) and have come to care deeply about them and search out "effective ways to act on those concerns" (p. 1). Sean's, James', Jamal's, Lorenzo's, and Andrea's individual narratives heightened in me my sense of social justice and equity for those individuals who are the most vulnerable.

Research Question #1

Why are high achieving Black students choosing not to participate in AP classes?

Several of the participants spoke about their fear of failing an AP class and were very concerned about the level of stress AP encompassed. Andrea, who had a GPA of 95% and was ranked number 16 out of a class of 197 students, spoke of her fear of failure after the guidance counselor cautioned her about having to repeat a class if she were to fail it. It is worth noting, that even though Andrea and Sean were eligible to enroll in AP classes, they would have to first undergo an interview with the AP director of the high school as well as take a writing test. Lorenzo also mentioned the dreaded test several times during our interview. In speaking with the students, it was evident that the requirement to take "the test" played a major factor in their decision not to enroll in AP

classes. Andrea, in particular, was very concerned about her writing ability as she did not feel her writing was up to par at the end of Grade 10. Writing ability was a deterrent for her and weighed heavily upon her as she struggled with the decision to enroll in AP.

Another factor that prevented several of the participants from enrolling in AP classes was the assumption that there was not much difference between the regular education classes and the AP classes. Andrea, Sean, and Lorenzo observed and discussed their assignments with friends who were enrolled in AP classes and concluded that they were all doing the same type of assignments. Lorenzo made the observation that his regular education Government class received the same study guide as the Accelerated Government class as well as the same test. James explained that his sister's opinion weighed heavily in his decision to enroll in AP classes. She was a college student and had conveyed to James that she did not see any value in taking AP classes.

All of the participants spoke at length about the lack of encouragement they received from their teachers and guidance counselors. Andrea was the only participant whose guidance counselor even broached the subject of AP with her, while Sean, who had a GPA of 93% and had taken Honors and Accelerated classes in his freshman and sophomore years, was the only participant who had a teacher recommended him for AP. Andrea explained in detail how the guidance counselor talked her out of enrolling in the AP class. She cautioned Andrea that if she failed the class, she would have to retake it. It is possible that the guidance counselor did not harbor any malicious feelings towards Andrea when she warned her that she might fail the AP course; however, Ford et al. (2002) posited that deficit thinking by teachers and other school personnel (e.g.,

counselors and administrators) about African American students lie at the heart of the persistent and pervasive underrepresentation of high achieving students in gifted and AP classes. Students depend on their teachers and guidance counselors to shape their course selection. As the professionals in the field, we have to be cognizant of the weight our words carry.

The issue of race and not wanting to stand out from their peers also played a role in not choosing to enroll in AP classes for four of my five participants. Sean spoke explicitly about not wanting to be the only “Black guy” in an AP class. “They do not want to be the only African American in the class: they fear feeling lonely, isolated, and different from White students” (Ford, 1995, p. 7). All too often, high achieving African American male students, like Sean have to “negotiate the tension between their academic identity and ethnic identity” (Graham & Anderson, 2008, p. 473). Sean shared that he did not have any Black friends who were taking AP classes. Several researchers (Bonner, Jennings, Marbley, & Brown, 2007; Graham & Anderson 2008; Grantham, 2004; Steele, 2003) believe that the influence of social, cultural and psychological variables must be considered when examining Black students, in particular, Black males, reluctance to remain in gifted or AP programs. Sean’s uneasiness to enroll in AP classes and perhaps to be the only Black male in his class might have stemmed from any or all of these factors.

Lorenzo also spoke of being a minority within a minority in his Honors Government class. Lorenzo was one of only three Black students. Lorenzo said, “But it makes you think, like, hmmm, should I be in here or should I not? He was proud of himself for making it into the class, but was also doubtful of his own abilities. Lorenzo’s

conflicted feelings about his academic ability is known as a “stereotype threat,” a term used by Steele (2003) to describe the “Threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (p. 111). For Lorenzo, who had to fight to get into the accelerated course, it was daunting to have to fight to convince himself he was where he needed, and deserved to be.

Several of the students also spoke about the phenomena of “acting White” or “not acting Black.” Sean was told frequently by his White friends that he was the Whitest Black person they knew, and his Black friends would tell him he did not act Black. Jamal, the only participant that was identified as gifted explained that he just completely gave up being Black because in elementary school the Black kids had been so hateful towards him. He felt that he was better off with the White kids who seemed to embrace him. Based on the lived experiences of the five participants in this study, several factors contribute to high achieving Black students not choosing to enroll in AP classes to include limited knowledge about the AP program, fear of failing, lack of encouragement from teachers and guidance counselors, and not wanting to stand out from their peers.

Research Question #2

How has the history and institution of gifted education aided and excluded Black students?

Since its inception, directors of the gifted program and Advanced Placement program have never been able to boast about recruitment and retention of minority students, in particular, African Americans (Ford & Grantham, 2003). “Intentionally or

unintentionally, gifted education and AP classes remain culturally, linguistically, and economically segregated, and still largely populated by White students, in general, and White middle-class students, in particular” (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008, p.292).

The underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and Advanced Placement classes has had a long history beginning with Dr. Martin D. Jenkins’ (1936) seminal study of Black students with high intelligence scores. Unlike the studies of Galton (1869) and Terman (1916), which only consisted of privileged, White children, Jenkins’ study was conducted with ordinary Black students in the public school system of Chicago. Building on Bond’s (1926) study of Black children with high intelligence, Jenkins sought to disprove Galton and Terman’s assertion that only White European children could be classified as highly intelligent (Jenkins, 1936). Although there was clear “evidence of giftedness in this population, very few published articles were available that emphasized possibilities and the urgency for attention to this concern in public schools” (Baldwin, A.Y. 2011, xi). In addition, Galton and Terman’s definition of giftedness was formulated in the belief that intelligence can be measured “accurately and effectively only by standardized tests” (Ford, 2011, p. 65), which excluded any and all culturally diverse assessments.

It was not until the Soviets’ Sputnik was launched into outer space in the mid-1950s that the United States began earnestly to consider its brightest students. “It is primarily during times of crises and reactivity that gifted students are given increased attention, and that educators and policymakers call for reforms, excellence, and equity for gifted students, including those in AP classes” (Ford, 2011, p. 20). Yet, despite the *Brown*

vs. Board of Education ruling and other federal educational acts, “Nowhere is this lack of access to equity more evident than in gifted education and AP classes, where Black and economically disadvantaged students are significantly underrepresented and, thus underserved” (Ford, 2011, p. 16).

Although the Brown ruling of 1954 made it possible for Black students to receive educational equity, it indirectly became instrumental in a series of legal maneuvers for White communities to avoid integration. The upsurge of gifted services and the introduction of Advanced Placement courses in the nation’s schools in the late 1950s were two of several obstacles used to erode the impact of the landmark decision, which also included gerrymandering of school zones, the building of Magnet and private schools (Clotfelter, 2004, Gilborn, 2005, Orfield, 2009, Staiger, 2004, Trent, 1981, Tyson, 2011) and more recently, the resurgence of Charter schools.

In his article, *Privilege, Equity, and the Advanced Placement Program: Tug of War*, Schneider (2009) revealed that AP classes were never intended for the middle class, much less minority students. Rather, Advanced Placement course work was a way for high status schools in the suburbs to serve their highest achieving students in order to make them more appealing to the Ivy League Schools. It is apparent that the creation of Advanced Placement and Gifted Programs were designed primarily to serve the interest of White students who attended wealthy suburban schools or private institutions, while excluding poor White students in rural communities and especially Black students who attended poorly funded urban schools. With the starkly low number of Black students enrolled in gifted and AP classes, it is easy to conclude, that for all its intentions, both

programs, “like many other promising school reforms in the U.S. designed to address inequities in education, has failed to level the playing field” (Schneider, 2009, p. 828).

Research Question #3

What role do educators have in the decision of Black students who drop out or elect not to participate in Advance Placement classes?

The biggest obstacle to enrollment in AP classes, according to the College Board (2002), is that of “teacher recommendation, 58%” (College Board, 2002, p. 17). As it is with gifted identification, research has shown (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002, Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008) that teachers are all too often the “gatekeepers because frequently [they] under refer Black students for screening and identification” (Gilman, Whiting, & Ford, 2009, p. 24). Concern for the underrepresentation of Black students participating in gifted and Advanced Placement classes is not a new issue. Beginning in 1936 with Jenkins’ study of Black children with superior intellectual abilities, researchers and educators today, continue to struggle to identify, recruit, and retain Black students in gifted and AP programs.

Only recently has there been a focus on the relationship between teacher referral and the identification of African American gifted students. In their study of the effect of a student’s ethnicity on teachers’ recommendation for gifted services, Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway (2005) provided teachers with three vignettes of a gifted student. In each vignette, only the ethnicity of the student was altered. The results indicated that the child’s ethnicity did make a difference in the referral for gifted services. Teachers perceived “non-labeled and European American students as essentially the same in

contrast to African American students” (p. 29). This finding was very disconcerting as African American students comprise nearly 17% of the total public school population in the United States of America (NCES, 2015). These results underscore the significant role teachers’ play in determining who qualifies for gifted services, which in turn plays a pivotal role in the trajectory of students when being considered for Advanced Placement courses once in high school. McBee (2006) conducted a study of referral and screening services for all elementary students in Georgia. His findings revealed two important factors: students who did not receive free or reduced lunch were more than three times likely to be referred for gifted testing than students who did receive free or reduced lunch; and the “quality of teacher nominations for Black students was especially poor” (p. 107). The low number of accurate “teacher nominations could indicate racism, classism, or cultural ignorance on the part of the teachers” (p. 109). In addition to low teacher recommendations, many schools also “create barriers (i.e., previous grades, teacher approval) that prevent some students from enrolling in AP classes” (Moore & Slate, 2008, p. 57).

The practice of creating barriers to discourage and prevent students from enrolling in AP classes was evident at Thurgood High School where this study took place. Four of the five participants mentioned that they would have to take a test and undergo an interview to determine if they would make it into the AP program. In concern for the paucity of minority students enrolling in AP classes, the College Board issued the following statement:

The College Board and the Advanced Placement Program encourage teachers, AP Coordinators, and school administrators to make equitable access a guiding principle for their AP programs. The College Board is committed to the principle that all students deserve an opportunity to participate in rigorous, academically challenging courses and programs. All students who are willing to accept the challenge of a rigorous academic curriculum should be considered for admission to AP courses. The Board encourages the elimination of barriers that restrict access for AP courses to students from ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in the AP Program. Schools should make every effort to ensure that their AP classes reflect the diversity of their student population. (College Board, 2002)

Recently, my son Isaiah, received notification from his guidance counselor to attend an informational meeting because he was recognized by the College Board as being identified through his PSAT scores, to show high potential to be successful in AP coursework. Isaiah, other students, and parents were invited to a meeting in the school library to learn about the program. The director of the AP program explained the positive outcomes of taking the more challenging coursework. She also informed us that the students were required to take a writing exam and undergo an interview before being accepted. Despite the College Board's AP Equity Policy Statement (2002), schools across the nation continue to erect barricades to impede students from enrolling in AP classes.

Three of the five participants in this study, James, Lorenzo, and Andrea shared that none of their teachers recommended them to enroll in the AP courses. Lorenzo, who excelled in math in middle school, was not enrolled in accelerated math for his freshman year. As a result, he was unable to join the honors math in his sophomore year. This made it impossible for Lorenzo to enroll in AP math courses because he did not possess the necessary prerequisites. He was however, in his junior year, able to enroll in Honors Government and Honors Science, after petitioning his teacher.

Low expectations on the part of teachers, inadequate teacher training in identifying gifted children, coupled with cultural incongruence, are the primary reasons why there are so few Black students being nominated, served, and retained in the gifted and AP programs. Irvine (1990) described this as a “lack of cultural synchronization” (p. 27). All too often, teacher biases concerning Black students play an integral role in their decision to recommend them for gifted and AP services.

Limitations

My research study had several limitations, specifically in the area of my methodology and my role as the researcher. The limitations noted will provide direction for further research on this topic. This study was primarily limited because only one of my five participants was gifted, and this participant was the only one to have taken any AP classes. The goal of this study was to ascertain why high achieving Black students were choosing not to participate in gifted and AP classes.

Through my research, I learned that very rarely does an elementary school student opt to leave the gifted program, and likewise for middle school. Once in high school, the

decision to take Honors and AP classes is left up to the student, unless, the student has been in gifted classes, if so, these students are automatically enrolled in AP classes. Tyson (2011) found that Black students who did participate in gifted programs in elementary and middle school were more likely to choose AP and Honors classes in high school because they were already familiar with the advanced curriculum, and have already cultivated a circle of similar friends. These two factors contribute to a sense of confidence and a belief of belonging (p. 130).

Another limitation was the high number of males versus female participants. Ideally, I would have preferred an equal number of each gender to obtain a greater depth of both male and female perceptions on this important topic. In hindsight, rather than leave the selection of the participants up to the principal and the college advisor, I would examine the list of eligible students myself and give each one a letter of introduction. I met with a total of seven students, five of whom agreed to participate in the study. Although the number of participants was small and included only one female participant, the themes that evolved from our discussions are valid

The fact that this study took place in only one school does limit the findings. In Marshall County, where the study took place, there is only one high school. The findings that I gleaned were illuminating and will be instrumental to the faculty of Thurgood High School. Further study on this topic in a high school with similar demographics should be considered to determine if the same perceptions among high achieving Black students will be found. Given that they appear to be logical extensions of the historical and social environment of our society, I fear these results will be recognizable in other schools

unless there are some deliberate interventions. In addition, observations in the gifted classes in the elementary and middle school level, as well as Honors and AP classes would have provided me with direct knowledge of the participants' lived experiences.

Future research in this area should include input from other stakeholders in the students' lives; parents and teachers. The information they share with me, the researcher, would provide a more holistic picture of each participant. This would have strengthened my study. Parents have a vested interest in their children's education, as do teachers.

Finally, a significant limitation in my study was that I was a teacher within the same county in which I conducted my study. I am a teacher in the same county where I conducted my research; therefore, I was very aware that there might be some backlash concerning my topic. With that thought in mind, I was cognizant that my findings might not necessarily reflect well of my county. I was concerned about "political ramifications" (Glesne, 2006, p. 192) with my administration. It should be noted that my school district was not my first choice, specifically, for the above concerns, but I had lost an entire academic year while I waited on a response from other school districts.

While I was pleased to be able to conduct the research in my own backyard (Glesne 2006), as it provided easy access to my participants, it was also challenging not to infuriate the administrators, colleagues, and other staff members whom I needed desperately in order to gather the necessary permission and data to conduct this study. One benefit, though, is that I will be able to make a presentation of my findings to my colleagues and administrators. This may not have been possible if I had conducted my research in another school district.

Another limitation concerning my role as researcher was that I was a former teacher of three of my participants, Sean, James, and Andrea, having taught them in third grade at Deerwood Elementary School. I already had a rapport with them because of our past relationship. For Sean and Andrea, it was very easy to pick up where we left off. There were not any awkward, getting to know one another again type of moments. In fact, Andrea requested that we conduct her interview in our old classroom. Both students were very honest and forthcoming in their responses and talked at length and in great detail. James, however, who was very shy in third grade and rarely spoke unless called on, was much more reserved in our interview. I had no prior relationship with the two remaining participants, Jamal and Lorenzo, other than seeing them in various after-school events such as cross-country and football, in which they and my son, Isaiah participated. .

I believe that this history made me appear trustworthy in the eyes of my participants. I believe that because they knew I was a White mother of Black children, and I was exploring a subject that impacted them, that this created a bond between us. They knew that I was vested in the education of Black children. In my letter of introduction, I informed the participants and their parents about the research relative to the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and AP classes. When I met with the seven participants in the school library, I was very passionate when I explained the reason for the study. I talked with two parents of the participants at the local grocery store during the midst of the study. Both parents relayed to me they believed the study was relevant.

I was aware of imposing my own bias on my participants. I was also concerned about my subjectivity because of my role as a teacher and also as an authority figure. I wondered (a) about recoiling if a participant said AP was a waste of time, (b) about how I should react when I agreed with a participant, and (c) wondered whether I was overbearing or leading the participant. I was concerned that my participants would simply tell me what they thought I wanted to hear because they knew me. In regards to being subjective, I had to remind myself that being aware of my subjectivity increased my awareness of how it could alter my research. However, it was my subjectivity that was the “basis for the story” (Glesne, 2006, p. 123). It was this subjectivity that drove me to tell the story. My subjectivity made me who I was as the researcher, and provided me “perspectives and insights” (Glesne, 2006, p. 123) “that shape all that I do as a researcher” (Glesne, 2006, p. 123).

Although I was guarded when I voiced my opinion in our interviews and worked diligently to give the participants space to voice their own opinion, it was a constant conflict for me to separate my researcher self from all my other selves. I was not just a researcher, but I was also a White mother of Black children, a mother who had witnessed her own children being subjected to racism and prejudice. I was not just a researcher but also a teacher, a teacher who had seen too many Black children not nominated for the gifted program because their gifts did not recognized by the dominant culture. Ford et al. (2008) contended that I should be “mindful of my humanness, my beliefs, attitudes, and values” (p. 83) when conducting research with diverse students and not to resist my life experiences; but instead allow them to guide my journey.

Recommendations

Professional Development

It is imperative that teachers be provided with staff development in the area of identifying gifted and high achieving Black students. Van Tassel-Baska and Strambaugh (2006) reported that only 3% of teacher preparation colleges offer courses in gifted education. In addition, courses about multiculturalism should be incorporated in all teacher preparation courses. Many colleges reserve such courses for teachers seeking their post graduate degree. How can we expect novice teachers to understand, appreciate, and work with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse” (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008b, p. 290) when they are not fully prepared? Research has shown the majority of teachers in our nation’s schools, who are White middle class females, are more effective in identifying White students than they are of identifying Black students (McBee, 2006, Ford, 2010, Snyder, 2007). Providing veteran teachers and pre-service teachers with a solid background in multiculturalism along with best practices, “research, policy, and theory” (Ford, et al, 2008b, p. 297) will contribute to more accurate number of culturally diverse students to be nominated and placed in gifted and AP programs.

Testing

It is important for educators in schools to search out and use alternative testing instruments for gifted programs that historically favor the White majority culture. Many states rely exclusively on the IQ test when determining who is qualified for gifted services because there is no federally mandated gifted testing protocol. In order to assess the cognitive ability of culturally diverse students, a number of tests are available that are

“considered less culturally loaded than traditional tests” (Ford, et al., 2008b, p. 305). For example, Saccuzzo, Johnson, and Guertin (1994) using *Raven’s Progressive Matrices* reported that “50% of the non-White children who had failed to qualify based on a WISC-R qualified with the Raven” (p.10). Naglieri and Ford (2003), in their study, reported that culturally diverse students had a much smaller difference in scores from their White peers using the Naglieri’s Non Verbal Ability Test (NNAT), a difference of only three points, when compared to a difference of 15 points between Black and White students when using the traditional IQ test. Traditional testing for gifted purposes does not test intelligence, but instead, measures previously acquired skills based on their development to environmental stimuli such as parents, books, and outside home excursions (Jencks & Phillips 1998).

AP Potential List

A tool that teachers and guidance counselors could use to recruit and retain high achieving Black students in AP course work in high school is that of the *AP Potential List*. Designed by the College Board (2014), The AP Potential List is a free web-based application provided to schools to identify students with diverse educational needs and backgrounds whose potential for success in AP classes may not show up in a typical academic profile. I first became familiar with this list when my son’s school sent home a letter explaining that because of his PSAT score, the College Board had determined that he would be successful in AP classes. If this list were made available to teachers, they could share this knowledge with their students. None of my participants spoke of this list and I did not know about it during the study. I can only surmise that if they had been told

they were on the list, they would have felt validated and perhaps may have considered taking AP classes.

Extraneous Barriers

Eliminating internally contrived obstacles such as writing tests, interviews, and teacher referrals to AP greatly would increase the recruitment of Black students into the AP program. These types of artificial barriers serve not to protect the integrity of the AP program, but rather as a gatekeeper in selecting who and who does not make it into the classroom. In its 2004 Barriers to Equity and Access statement, in which the College Board recommended “An Open Door Policy for AP” to all interested students, the College Board referred to these inequalities as “silent gate-keeping mechanisms embedded in the school culture that prevent certain groups of students from accessing the AP courses” (p. 2). The College Board asserted that when educators in schools encourage an open access policy for its AP classes, that over time, equity for the underrepresented will be achieved. Also stressed is the concept of developing scholars through its Pre-AP strategies and AP Vertical Team in which all students are prepared for AP coursework beginning with middle school.

Parents

Parents are their children’s first teachers and their experiences and opinions as stakeholders in their children’s lives should not be discounted, but rather embraced and encouraged. Jenkins (1989) explained,

Black families are like any other family institution in that it wants the best that life has to offer educationally, financially, spiritually, politically and socially for

its members. Simultaneously, it is unlike any other family due to its unique status imposed by the deep structure (warf and woof of racism) of the American social system. Black families have not been entirely free to manipulate the essential components of life to the same degree as have their White counterparts. (p. 139)

In her book, *Their Highest Potential*, Siddle-Walker (1996) described in detail the relationship between parents, teachers, and community stakeholders. Despite living under the oppression of Jim Crow, parents and teachers worked together as collaborators in ensuring the academic success of their children. “Developing and sustaining parental involvement cannot occur if teachers, principals, and other decision-makers in schools do not promote environments of trust, acceptance, and warmth for parents coming from different cultural backgrounds” (Milner & Ford, 2007, p. 8). School officials must reach out to parents and invite them to the table as equal partners in the pursuit of educating their children. Educators can achieve this when we engage in an honest discourse that we have not served our high achieving Black students well. If we fail to do so, gifted and AP classes will continue to consist of White children and Black children and youth will continue to be underrepresented.

In order to include families in the recruitment and retention of high achieving Black students, in AP classes, educators in schools should have a specific plan of protocol in place that could include parent, teacher, and student conferences, grade level parent meetings in the evening for parents who work during the day as well as an afternoon meeting to accommodate parents who work shift hours. Telephone calls home to communicate their child’s potential to be successful in AP classes, follow up notes,

and general parenting informative seminars in which information about the AP program, its benefits and negatives could be discussed. Parents often do not know how to navigate the complexities of the school system and can be uncomfortable with the bureaucracy that encompasses schooling (Huff et al., 2005) and may even harbor resentment towards the school and teachers if they perceive they are unwelcome in the building. It is up to us educators to foster and nurture the relationship between ourselves and our student's family.

Conclusion

There is a plethora of data that chronicles the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and AP programs (Fraizer, 1995; Ford, 1996; 2006; 2010; Grantham, 2004; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Tomlinson, 2002; Whiting, 2009) in our nation. However, very little data originates from the students themselves (Noguera, 2003, Thompson, 2002). This study provided high achieving Black students a platform in which they could share their experiences and perceptions about the barriers they perceive that prevent them from enrolling in gifted and AP classes. "This waste of human potential and talent must be rectified" (Whiting, G. 2009, p. 232). Findings from the interviews revealed significant factors that contributed to students' reluctance to participate in gifted and AP programs to include lack of teacher encouragement, not fully understanding the benefits of the programs, fear of stress and failure, and not wanting to stand out from their peers.

Schools, I have learned, are “Racialized spaces that reproduce power structures and perpetuate inequalities that negatively affect” (Seay, 2013, p. 157) Black students’ academic opportunities. Drawing on critical race theory as my theoretical framework allowed me to understand my participants’ lived experiences while also providing a lens through which I could understand “How race and racism affect education and lives of the racially disenfranchised” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p.8). Critical race theory, coupled with critical race narrative provided a platform for my participants to share and examine their experiences in the school setting through a prism of historical and social context. Critical race theory enabled me to “Define, expose, and address educational problems” (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 8) that hinder high achieving Black students from participating in programs that would ideally provide them with a competitive edge as they prepare for college or entry into the work force.

Earlier, in chapter three, I discussed the conundrum I face, both as an educator and a mother of Black children when contemplating the value of gifted and AP classes. Should I advocate, nominate, and continue to push Black students into a program that I now know creates a segregated school within a school system? A program that may cause them to question their identity and their intellectual ability? A program they have to fight to get into, and then fight some more to stay in? These are tough questions to answer and despite this three year odyssey, I find myself vacillating. Even if better identifying tools and tests were designed that resulted in a greater number of Black students sitting in the classrooms of gifted and AP programs, it will be in vain if we do not address the

historical and systemic racism along with the long standing dominant ideology that has permeated our schools' corridors.

The results of this study suggested that in order to recruit and retain high achieving Black students in gifted and AP programs, educators, administrators, parents, and policy makers must be willing to look beyond the traditional means of identifying potential for gifted and AP programs and consider that Black students face unique challenges; challenges that with encouragement, training, and support of research based findings such as those used to guide this study, can be used to decrease the barriers many Black students perceive when considering these programs.

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