

UNDERSTANDING HIGH-ACHIEVING HISPANIC AND BLACK HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN HONORS AND ADVANCED PLACEMENT
COURSES: A PHENOMENOLOGY

by

Kristy Simpson Alvarez

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students' experiences with honors and advanced placement (AP) courses in a Georgia private high school. The participants for this study were 11 high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students as defined by a 3.0 or higher, grade point average (GPA) and enrollment in at least one advanced placement or honors course. Focus group interviews, individual participant interviews, and student journals were used as data collection methods. Data analysis followed van Kaam's method—horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: validation, and textural and structural descriptions. The research questions addressed the lived experiences of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. Overall, the participants described their experiences in their honors and AP courses as mostly positive, yet competitive. Further, they felt that their relationships with their teachers were supportive and strong. The participants described their relationships with their peers in class as competitive and overall positive, but they felt that their peers exhibited negative racial undertones at times. Future research should be conducted in diverse public schools by a researcher not connected to the participants.

Keywords: accessibility, achievement gap, advanced placement program, Adequate Yearly Progress, The College Board, No Child Left Behind

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my father Richard Allen Simpson. Because of his words of encouragement to me as a child to always pursue my best and achieve at the highest level, I was always determined to make him proud through my academic and career pursuits. He instilled in me a desire to never give up and always work for what I wanted in my life. I know that he is beaming with pride as he looks down on me from heaven.

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Thank you to my mom and dad for always encouraging me to achieve academically and for supporting me with love and encouragement along the way.

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List of Abbreviations

Academic Performance Index (API)

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Advanced Placement (AP)

Advanced Placement Incentive Program (APIP)

Chief Financial Officer (CFO)

Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESSA)

Georgia Private High School (GPHS)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In 1983, the National Commission on Education Excellence released a publication known as *A Nation at Risk* (Lee & Wong, 2004). What ensued from this publication was a reformation of American education that sought to raise the quality of American education far above the “minimum competency” (Lee & Wong, 2004, p. 807) of academic achievement. It has now been over 30 years since the report was published and there are still millions of American children who are not getting a high-quality education (Darling-Hammond, 2007a; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). The achievement gap between White and students of color is one of the most pressing and challenging issues in education today (Blanchett, 2006; Lee, 2002; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Olszewski-Kubilius & Thomson, 2010; Powers, 2004; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Swartz, 2009; Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). While legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has been enacted to decrease the gap, the gap remains wide and far-reaching (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Children from underrepresented racial or ethnic communities continue to be less successful in school than White children and are underrepresented in gifted, honors, and advanced classes (Brown, 2009; Matthews & Kitchen, 2007; Moore & Slate, 2008; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Sherman, 2008; The College Board, 2014). According to Olszewski-Kubilius and Thomson (2010), “racial disparities in academic achievement also are found among the ablest students, specifically among high scorers on the SAT-Math and Reading” (p. 58). As a result, they struggle for acceptance into prestigious colleges and universities at the same rate as White children, and it is easy to discover the ramifications of these issues when looking at the structure of American culture (Brown, 2009; Ford, 2010; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Strick, 2012; Swartz, 2009).

This current study was conducted to describe the experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and advanced placement (AP) courses. In this chapter, background information on the achievement gap among races is introduced with a discussion of desegregation, White flight and the resegregation of schools through honors and AP classrooms. Next, the problem and purpose statements are introduced, followed by a discussion of the significance of the study. Finally, research questions and definitions of key terms are included.

Background

Historical

The landmark court case *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954 legally ended segregation in schools (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004). However, because of the White flight of the 1960s and 1970s, and resegregation in the late 1980s and 1990s, many schools remain segregated because of the mass exodus of White families from the cities to the suburbs (Brown & Hunter, 2009; Long, Kelly, & Gamoran, 2012; Taylor, 2006). In addition, the methods used by school boards to draw district lines to determine the school children will attend, based on what neighborhoods they live in, has also contributed to continued segregation (Taylor, 2006).

Another factor that contributes to continued segregation is the fact that White students, especially those that live in urban school districts, tend to enroll in private schools rather than attend their neighborhood school (Taylor, 2006). While segregation by race is illegal in schools, the demographical makeup of many classrooms across the United States seem to suggest that segregation within schools is prevalent (Blanchett, 2006; Moore & Slate, 2008; Pitts, 2007; Rubin, 2003). In addition, students are assigned to classrooms based on their academic ability measured by standardized tests, which have been criticized for their innate bias (Ford & Whiting,

2010; Lidz & Macrine, 2001; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019; Rubin, 2003; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007).

Schools continue to exhibit “educational inequities and resegregation” in the classroom as a result of tracking students (Rubin, 2003, p. 540). Research cited by Rubin (2003) and others (Blanchett, 2006; Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007; Lidz & Macrine, 2001; Morris & Monroe, 2009; LeTendre, Hofer, & Shimizu, 2003) shows that minority students, specifically Hispanic and African American students, are disproportionately represented in high percentages in special education and low-level classes. On the other hand, gifted, honors, and AP classes are made up mostly of White and Asian students (Moore & Slate, 2008; Olszewski-Kubilius & Thomson, 2010; Pitts, 2007; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; The College Board, 2014). The association that provides AP classes—The College Board—has an equity policy statement that school officials must use to push enrollment of more diverse populations of students in AP classes: The College Board (2002) and the AP program encourages teachers, AP coordinators, and school administrators to make equitable access a guiding principle for their AP programs. Because of the push by The College Board (2010) to diversify their program, there has been an increase in the enrollment of Hispanic and Black students as well as students from low socioeconomic homes in AP classes (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; The College Board, 2010).

However, the number of Hispanic and Black students enrolled in AP classes is still low compared to their White counterparts (Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003; Olszewski-Kubilius & Thomson, 2010; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; The College Board 2014; Vail, 2006). Further, when Hispanic, Black, and students from low socioeconomic homes, take AP courses they are more likely to fail the AP exams or receive lower scores in the class than are the White students (Ndura et al., 2003; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; The College Board

2010; Vail, 2006). In addition, The College Board's (2010) statement only refers to AP classes. There is no statement that addresses other high-level classes, such as honors classes (The College Board, 2010). Therefore, it is important for teachers and administrators at individual schools to encourage students of varying backgrounds to enroll in those classes (Davis, Davis, & Mobley, 2013; Ford, 2010; Lindz & Macrine, 2001; Lovett, 2011; Ndura et al., 2003; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; VanTassel-Baska et al, 2007).

The demographics of individual classes within a school, specifically core classes that are organized into levels of academic ability or achievement, should be representative of the demographics of the entire school population (Blanchett, 2006, Ndura et al., 2003). However, this is not always the case, leading educators to question the equity of educational opportunity provided for all students (Blanchett, 2006; Brayboy et al., 2007). According to Skerrett and Hargreaves (2008), "educational practices that emphasize and reify Eurocentric knowledge and traditional testable academic skills over other cultural forms of knowledge, while using seemingly equity-based, culture-free, and color-blind discourses and practices aimed to improve student learning and achievement" (p. 914) are not enough to provide equitable education for all students. A study of the demographics of gifted and AP classes to determine the equity of educational opportunity afforded to minority students, specifically Hispanic and African American students, is a relevant study that could raise important questions about gifted education and equity (Brayboy et al., 2007).

Social

Educating the diverse students of today is an arduous task. Students come to the classroom with a myriad of outside influences that affect the way they learn and their individual needs (Brayboy et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2015). It is the job of educators to meet the learning needs

of these diverse students. Students requiring special services are often the focus of much controversy; gifted education is no different. Often, educators will lump all gifted students together into one group but grouping students in this way is a disservice to gifted children. Just like students of the general education population, gifted students are diverse and have unique individual needs. This is especially important regarding socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Pitts, 2007). Because of the NCLB legislation, there has been a push in the past 10 years for schools to provide equal educational opportunities for specific populations that have been underserved in the past (Balfanz et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007a; Powers, 2004; Sherman, 2008; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). The legislation focuses on providing equal access to quality education for Hispanic and African American students and students from low socioeconomic families (Balfanz et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007a; Powers, 2004; Sherman, 2008; Zhang & Cowen, 2009).

Theoretical

Critical race theory (CRT), developed by Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado in the 1970s, was used to guide the present study (Delgado, Stefanic, & Harris, 2017). Critical race theorists are concerned with challenging both subtle and overt racism (Delgado et al., 2017). CRT has found a place in today's educational landscape, focusing on addressing the resegregation of schools, as well as bias in standardized testing and other issues concerning students of color (Delgado et al., 2017). Because honors and AP classes have a disproportionate amount of Hispanic and Black students in them, and one of the most common ways of identifying students for the classes uses standardized tests, CRT is an appropriate lens through which to view this current study. Critical race theorists believe "that racism is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged" (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 8). Critical race

theorists also believe that “race has no biological merit but is an arbitrary societal invention” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 8). The present study was focused on understanding the lived experiences of the participants to understand factors that affect the achievement gap and the participation in AP and honors classes between White students and students of color.

Because of the complexity of the racial achievement gap, Jeynes (2015) suggested that there is not just one theoretical approach to understanding the achievement gap and offering various points of view—economic, cultural and learning styles, and school based versus individual solutions—to address the achievement gap. Economically, as long as there is a disparity among races, the achievement gap will persist (Jeynes, 2015). Further, Jeynes pointed out that “the American schooling system needs to demonstrate a greater degree of cultural sensitivity and awareness of the fact that children have distinct learning styles” (p. 525).

Additionally, American schools are set up in a way that favors the learning preferences of Caucasian people (Jeynes, 2015). Finally, Jeynes suggested that there is a debate among social scientists on whether the best way to decrease the achievement gap is to approach it at the individual or school level. Each of these areas of theory are also relevant to the present study, because the goal of conducting this study is to decrease the achievement gap between White students and Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. By getting first-hand experiences of Black and Hispanic students who take honors and AP courses and studying their common characteristics, insight can be gained into the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students.

Morris and Monroe (2009) suggested that research on the achievement of Black students should take place in the U.S. South. Most of the recent research that was focused on Black student achievement has been conducted outside of the South and mostly in California and New

York (Morris & Monroe, 2009). However, most Black Americans reside in the southern states and continue to move there in large numbers: “More than 3.6 million Black people migrated to the U.S. South during the 1990’s” (Morris & Monroe, 2009, p. 21). The present study was also focused on Hispanic students who reside in large numbers in the South (Morris & Monroe, 2009). The body of research on Hispanic students is also mostly limited to California, New York, and Texas (Morris & Monroe, 2009). Research studies are needed that focus specifically on the South because of the historical implications that are closely connected to the achievement gap between White students and Hispanic and Black students (Morris & Monroe, 2009; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). In addition, there is a need to raise the academic achievement of students across all ability levels (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Conducting this current transcendental phenomenological study represents an effort to describe high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students’ experiences in honors and AP courses in a Georgia private high school.

Situation to Self

Research confirms that minority students, specifically Hispanic and Black students, are underrepresented in honors and AP classes (Pitts, 2007; Rubin, 2003; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). However, there has not been a significant amount of research to determine why this phenomenon occurs. In addition, there is even less research to interpret the experience of taking an honors or AP course from the point of view of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students (Gayles, 2006). I chose to conduct this phenomenological study describing high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students’ experiences in honors and AP courses in the hope that it will offer an understanding of their experiences in honors and AP courses.

I employed a constructionist paradigm in the study, because I sought to understand the varied meanings the participants had, to interpret the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I

did not have a preconceived theory of why this phenomenon occurred and sought to interpret the ideas of the participants to come to an understanding of the situation. In addition, I asked open-ended questions to elicit the subjective meanings the participants had of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As an AP and honors English teacher, I had firsthand knowledge of the process schools use to enroll students in honors and AP courses, and the fact that Hispanic and Black students are disproportionately represented in the courses. As a result, I brought to the study some bias. My previous knowledge was bracketed out to focus on the experiences of the students and to make meaning of their unique experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Problem Statement

Academic achievement of minority students remains behind that of White students at all levels of education in the United States (Alexander, 2002; Blanchett, 2006; Brayboy et al., 2007; Carpenter, Ramirez, & Severn, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby, Taliaferro, & Greenfield, 2009; Jeynes, 2015; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Lee, 2002; Morris & Monroe, 2009; Powers, 2004; Roach, 2005; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019; Roscigno, 1999; Sherman, 2008; Stewart, 2008 Taylor, 2006 Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Verdugo, 2011; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Reform efforts have remained at the forefront of legislation since the early 1970s, in addition to the NCLB 2001 signed into law in 2002 (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004) and, more recently, the Advanced Placement Incentive Program (APIP; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). However, little progress has been made in creating equality in American schools for all groups of students (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Swartz, 2009). Minority students, specifically African American and Hispanic students, are underrepresented in AP and honors classes (The College Board, 2014, VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). In addition, when they are enrolled in these

classes, they are less successful than their White counterparts, earning lower grades and test scores (Davis et al., 2013; Moore & Slate, 2008; The College Board, 2010). Further, research has shown that increasing the minority population in AP courses widens the achievement gap instead of decreasing it (Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019). The present study represents an effort to address this problem by attempting to understand the experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors, gifted, and AP courses. The problem of this study was the higher percentage of White students taking honors and AP classes than that of Black and Hispanic students, which contributes to the achievement gap between races.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to understand high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students' experiences in honors and AP courses in a Georgia private high school. For this study, high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students were those Hispanic and Black high school students who, at the time of the study, had a 3.0 or higher GPA and had taken an honors or AP course. High-achieving Hispanic and Black students are taking honors and AP courses at a lower rate than are White students and are also passing AP exams at a lower rate than White students (Jeynes, 2015; The College Board, 2014; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). A transcendental phenomenological study was utilized to investigate the personal, lived, and unique experiences and perceptions of the study participants. The present study was guided by Bell's CRT (Delgado et al., 2017). The present study adds to the existing body of knowledge the point of view of high-achieving minority students and their experiences in gifted, honors, and AP courses (Matthews & Kitchen, 2007).

Significance of the Study

Because of the NCLB legislation, schools have become more accountable for providing equal education to all students (Balfanz, Legters, West, & Weber, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007a; Powers, 2004; Sherman, 2008; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). However, minority students, especially African American and Hispanic students, remain left out of AP and honors classes at high rates (Moore & Slate, 2008; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). At the same time, they are in the majority when it comes to enrollment in special education and remedial or lower-level classes (Artiles, 2011; Blanchet, 2006). Research shows a need to improve the achievement of students at all ability levels and not to just maintain the status quo (Darling-Hammond, 2007a). Additionally, according to Morris and Monroe (2009), “the neglect of the contemporary U.S. South in scholarly research on African American schooling in the present era, particularly in the discourse on the academic achievement gap, is surprising given that the majority of the nation’s Black population” is in the south (p. 21). Therefore, conducting a study relevant to the achievement gap using a Georgia school system was an appropriate and relevant study that adds to the body of research.

This study was conducted to understand the experiences that minority students, specifically Hispanic and Black students, have in honors, gifted, and AP courses to provide teachers and other school personnel valuable insight into why there may be a low enrollment of minority students in these classes. The findings could also help encourage teachers to recommend more high-achieving Hispanic and Black students for enrollment in honors, gifted, and AP courses. In addition, the findings could encourage teachers and other school personnel to seek ways to provide extra support to minority students in honors, gifted and AP courses. The study findings could also increase awareness among teachers of gifted minority students of their

specific needs and those needs could be served in more appropriate ways to increase achievement.

Finally, there is a need for research of gifted minority students and their experiences in, and perceptions of, honors and AP classes (Belleza, 2012; Matthews & Kitchen, 2007). There is very little research that addresses the achievement gap from the point of view of the gifted minority student. Examining their experiences in the classes could provide insight for teachers and school personnel on the challenges that minority students face when they are enrolled in honors, gifted, and AP classes.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study was guided by a central question and five research subquestions.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

While past research studies have been conducted investigating the achievement gap between White students and students of color in honors and AP courses (Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019), there is little research on the experiences of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. This was conducted to fill that gap by describing the experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses.

Research Subquestions (SQs)

SQ1. How do high-achieving Hispanic and Black students describe their experiences in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in a Georgia private high school?

Lee (2002) suggested that it is important to study the experiences of high-achieving Black and Hispanic students. Minority students should have the opportunity to describe, in their own words, what it is like for them to be in honors and AP courses. Therefore, this question provides the opportunity for participants to share their personal knowledge and involvement in the honors and AP courses.

SQ2. What factors impact the success of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

Past studies have indicated various factors that impact the academic success of Hispanic and Black students based on numerical and demographic data (Lee 2002; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019). However, the present study was used to determine those factors as described by the students themselves, based on their lived experiences in honors and AP courses. Asking SQ2 provided the opportunity for the participants to share personal stories and examples of their experiences in class, rather than using only statistical information (Lee, 2002).

SQ3. What factors impact a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student's decision to enroll in an honors or Advanced Placement (AP) course?

Determining the reasons that Hispanic and Black students decide to enroll in AP and honors classes can aid in understanding common characteristics that the students have. Past studies have shown that teachers and parents are influential in students' decisions to take AP and honors classes (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007; Verdugo, 2011). Therefore, by understanding these reasons teachers and other school personnel could gain insight into how they might encourage other Hispanic and Black students to enroll in the honors and AP classes. SQ3 was asked to give students a chance to share personal reasons and explanations for their decisions to enroll in AP and honors classes.

SQ4. What factors impact a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student’s decision not to enroll in an honors or Advanced Placement (AP) course?

The decision of a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student not to enroll in an honors or AP course can have lasting impacts on his or her life. Studies have shown various social reasons that affect a Black student’s decision to avoid AP and Honors classes (Gayles, 2006; Henfield, Washington, & Owens, 2010; Lovett, 2011). Therefore, understanding the choice of a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student not to enroll in an AP or honors course can add valuable insight. This question addresses the decision of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students to take an AP or honors class.

SQ5. What challenges do high-achieving Hispanic and Black students face in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

By understanding the challenges faced by high achieving Hispanic and Black students who take honors and AP courses, teachers and other school personnel could learn ways to provide additional support and encouragement to Hispanic and Black students. Davis et al. (2013) suggested that students of color need additional support from school personnel when they are enrolled in honors and AP courses. The hope is that school personnel could encourage more participation in AP and honors courses for students of color (Davis et al., 2013).

Definitions of Key Term

1. *Achievement Gap*- The discrepancy in academic achievement that exists between White students and minority and low-income students which is measured by myriad factors including standardized tests, GPA, and college acceptance and attendance (Taylor, 2006).
2. *Advanced Placement (AP) Program*- High school courses that are taught at a rigorous level intended to emulate a college course. Course syllabi must be approved by The

College Board for a high school to be able to designate a course as AP. There are currently over 30 courses offered as part of the AP program (The College Board, 2014).

3. *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*- A system used to check the progress of schools across the United States to determine if they are making the appropriate academic gains specified in the NCLB legislation (United States Department of Education, 2019b).
4. *The College Board*- A nonprofit organization that produces and administers college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT, and also produces and administers AP exams and governs the AP program in high schools (The College Board, 2014).
5. *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*- Educational reform established in 2002 by President George W. Bush to improve academic proficiency of American students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019b).
6. *Race to the Top Fund (RTTT)*- Educational grants created by President Obama to be implemented at the state level in states that create plans that can be achieved by states to make significant education gains (U.S. Department of Education, 2019c).

Summary

Chapter One included the social, historical, and theoretical background for the study.

There is a significant achievement gap between Hispanic and Black and White students. Further, Hispanic and Black students continue to take fewer AP and honors classes than do White students (The College Board, 2014). The purpose of this study was to understand why Hispanic and Black students take honors and AP courses at a lower rate than that of White students and how this discrepancy affects the achievement gap between races. Finally, the chapter included the central research question and five subquestions used to guide the study, as well as definitions of key terms. Chapter One included a succinct explanation for the need to explore Hispanic and

Black students' experiences in honors and AP courses to learn more about the discrepancy between Hispanic and Black students' and White students' participation in honors and AP courses.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

There are myriad factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted and AP classes (Del Siegle et al., 2016; Pitts, 2007; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). It is important that schools and educators be aware of the pitfalls that contribute to this disparity (Davis et al., 2013; Lindz & Macrine, 2007; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). Educators must constantly evaluate the methods used to determine placement in classes and seek to knock down racial and economic barriers that are associated with and contribute to the inequity of education of minority children (Davis et al., 2013; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). Chapter two includes a discussion of the Theoretical Framework guiding this study—Critical Race Theory. Next, the related literature section follows and includes a synthesis of the literature about (a) racial achievement gap, (b) identification of gifted students, teacher perceptions and identification, (c) student perceptions, (d) influence of parents, (e) tracking and ability grouping, (f) history of the AP program, (g) minority participation, (h) impact on society, (i) No Child Left Behind Act, (j) racial achievement gap on Advanced Placement Exams, (k) using the south for optimal research on black achievement. Finally, chapter two ends with a summary of the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Equity in education and bridging the achievement gap across ethnicities is at the forefront of educational reform resulting in part from the NCLB legislation, Race to the Top, and recent updates to the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESSA; Balfanz, et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007a; Powers, 2004; Sherman, 2008; U. S. Department of Education, 2019b; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). The underrepresentation of minority students in AP classes continues to be the

focus of much research (Davis et al., 2013; Ford & Whiting, 2010; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Lovett, 2011; Pitts, 2007; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019).

When looking at educational equity regarding ethnicity, it is important to consider social and cultural issues (Brown, 2009; Stewart, 2008; Verdugo, 2011; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019).

Therefore, a significant amount of research regarding academic achievement and equity has been viewed through the theoretical framework of CRT (Arai & Kivel, 2009).

CRT is a framework developed by Bell (Delgado et al., 2017) in the 1970s because of the lack of implementation of the desegregation of schools that was mandated by *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954 (Darling-Hammond, 2007b), which overruled the constitutionality of the separate but equal doctrine (Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Taylor, 2006). Bell felt that the desegregation process was not successful in making schools equitable (Delgado et al., 2017; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Taylor, 2006). Further, Bell and other critical race theorists suggested that one issue with subtle racism is that it is not acknowledged (Delgado et al., 2017).

Critical race theorists are concerned with looking at how those in power, usually a specific culture, exert their power and influence over those who make up the minority populations (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Delgado et al., 2017; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Taylor, 2006). This power is both overt and covert (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Ortiz & Jani, 2010). The main purpose of CRT research is to bring about social justice and change (Delgado et al., 2017; Taylor, 2006). One of the major underpinnings of CRT is that of race and racial identity (Delgado et al., 2017; Taylor, 2006). Race is a socially constructed term with no biological basis that is used to separate and identify people to place them in categories of those with and without power in society (Delgado et al., 2017; Taylor, 2006).

Because this current study was an examination of the experiences of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in AP and honors classes for minority groups, framing the study through the lens of CRT was appropriate (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Taylor, 2006). The disparity in the participation and success of Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses is a far-reaching and persistent problem in American schools (Jeynes, 2015; Rodriguez and McGuire, 2019). The present study contributes to the literature on the achievement gap of Black and Hispanic and White students by providing high-achieving Hispanic and Black students' points of view regarding their experiences in honors and AP courses in a mostly White, affluent, private high school.

Related Literature

There is a significant body of research that shows the disproportionate numbers of Hispanic, Black, and low-income students enrolled in AP classes as compared to White students and students from middle- to high-income families. Therefore, the related literature begins with a discussion of the racial achievement gap and the identification of gifted students. However, there is not much existing research to explain why this is the case. To address this, teacher and student perceptions, identification procedures, tracking and ability grouping, and parental influence are discussed. Additionally, the history of the AP program and minority students' participation, NCLB legislation, and the racial achievement gap on the AP exam support the notion that there is a significant disparity in participation of black and Hispanic students in AP programs. To conclude the discussion of related literature, a rationale for conducting a study in the south related to the racial achievement gap is provided.

Racial Achievement Gap

The achievement gap between White students and minority students has been an issue since the beginning of schooling in the United States. Many initiatives have surfaced over the years attempting to decrease the gap— Equality of Educational Opportunity Report also known as *The Coleman Report* (Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E. Q., Hobson, C. J., McPartland, J., Mood, A. M., Weinfield, F. D., & York, R. L., 1966); The Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019a); *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984); *No Child Left Behind*, 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019b); *Race to the Top Fund*, 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019a) ; Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2019a). While small gains have been noted in different periods of time over the past 50-plus years, the gap is still wide and far-reaching (Davis et al., 2013; Jeynes, 2015; Olszewski-Kubilius & Thomson, 2010; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; Sherman, 2008; The College Board, 2014). Consequently, “the achievement gap widens throughout K-12 education and actually increases the longer students remain in school” (Sherman, 2008, p. 680). According to McDonough (2015), “by the end of third grade . . . the racial divide in test scores between Blacks and Whites is apparent in virtually every skill tested and is widening at a rate of 0.10 standard deviations per year for math and reading” (p. 18). In addition, African American students are “2.41 times more likely than White students to be identified as having mental retardation, 1.13 times more likely to be labeled as learning disabled, and 1.68 times as likely to be found to have an emotional or behavioral disorder” (Blanchett, 2006, p. 24). Data cited by Harris and Herrington (2006) show that “the achievement gap between Whites and African Americans is at least 0.80 standard deviations and as high as 1.14 standard deviations; for Hispanics, the gap is more than 0.40 standard deviations and as much as

1.0” (p. 210). Furthermore, Davis et al. (2013) reported “nearly half of all African American students who took an AP exam in 2011 earned the lowest possible score” (p. 35). Further, The College Board (2014) reported that of the 2013 graduating class, African Americans only made up 9.2% of test takers and only 4.6% of those test takers passed the exams with at least a 3 out of 5.

To reduce the achievement gap, fundamental changes in the way children are schooled in the United States must be made and a new mindset by educators and legislators alike is needed (Taylor, 2006). The achievement gaps “are now so pronounced, according to the Department of Education, that by twelfth grade, the reading and math scores of many students of color equal that of White eighth graders” (Taylor, 2006, p. 77). The academic achievement in schools for Hispanic and Black students is substantially behind that of White students at all levels and academic subjects and has been noted in a plethora of research studies (Alexander, 2002; Blanchett, 2006; Brayboy et al., 2007; Carpenter et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2013; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2009; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Lee, 2002; Morris & Monroe, 2009; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Powers, 2004; Roach, 2005; Roscigno, 1999; Sherman, 2008; Stewart, 2008; Taylor, 2002; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Verdugo, 2011; The College Board, 2010, 2011, 2014). Van den Bergh et al. (2010) studied the achievement gap of minority students in the Netherlands and found that an achievement gap exists there as well, and affects the minorities of their country, including Muslim students. This finding is significant, because it supports the notion that no matter what the minority group is in a country, it is likely that there will exist an achievement gap between the majority and minority populations (Van den Bergh et al., 2010).

Verdugo (2011) examined the achievement gap between White and minority students and concluded that, even though a decrease in the achievement gap between White and minority students was shown between 13-year-old students in 1978 and 17-year-old students in 1982 on the NAEP Math test, the test scores were actually upwardly biased because of the substantial dropout rates of minority students, meaning that the students who are taking the test in eighth grade are not the same ones taking the test in 12th grade. Therefore, the decrease in the achievement gap may not actually be as large as it seems and needs to be studied more closely (Verdugo, 2011). Further, Verdugo (2011) suggested there are many factors that contribute to the achievement gap, including parental involvement and expectations, community expectations and low-income and urban school districts that are predominantly of minority status, and student mobility indicating students are moving from school to school. In addition, according to both Lee (2002) and Taylor (2006), NAEP scores suggest that the achievement gap between Black and Hispanic students and White students has decreased since the 1970s; however, based on the gap since the 1990s, it is actually showing signs of increasing and erasing any progress that was made in the 1970s and 1980s. Kettler and Hurst (2017) confirmed that the participation in AP courses is lower for Black and Hispanic students than for White students and that, although it has not increased, it has stayed essentially the same over the past 10 years.

When looking at the achievement gap between White students and students of color, Lee (2002) suggested, “We should look beyond conventional measures of racial and ethnic inequity in order to develop a new framework for further empirical research on the bifurcated racial and ethnic gap patterns” (p. 110). Further research studies should address the deeper issues and factors that affect the gap (Lee, 2002). In addition, Lee (2002) suggested that when looking at the achievement gap, one must look at the minority students who are high-achieving and make

sure that there is progress in raising their achievement and identifying more high-achieving students of color as well. For the most part, efforts to raise the achievement of minority students have been focused solely on increasing the achievement of the low-performing students with little or no effort placed on the higher end of the spectrum (Lee, 2002). The AP Reports for 2011 and 2014 should also be studied more closely with regard to the achievement gap decrease. According to The College Board (2011, 2014), test results show that Hispanic students are becoming more successful on AP exams and they have reported that the achievement gap is decreasing. However, on closer examination, it has been shown that Hispanic students are most successful on the AP exams in Spanish (The College Board, 2011, 2014). If their scores on the Spanish exams are removed, and one looks at the scores of Hispanic students on all the other AP exams, it is quite clear that the achievement gap between Hispanic and White students is still significant and has not decreased much (The College Board, 2011, 2014).

A lack of necessary resources, including quality veteran teachers and materials appropriate for educating students at a rigorous level, has a tremendous effect on the achievement gap (Taylor, 2006). Because so many minority students attend schools in urban districts with poor funding, they are not exposed to the support they need to achieve at high levels (Taylor, 2006). Owens (2018) determined that income gaps between White and Black families contribute to the achievement gap between the two races. In 2000, a law suit was filed against the state of California claiming that its schools' performance measure, known as the Academic Performance Index (API) which determines the achievement of students in the state, was an unfair measure because it failed to consider the inequality of its schools. Owens (2018) reported that even when White and Black families earn similar incomes, Black families are still more likely to live in lower income neighborhoods, some of which can be attributed to unfair

housing practices. In addition, “the central issue of the case was students’ access to the ‘bare essentials’ of public education: qualified teachers, current textbooks, and adequate and safe facilities” (Powers, 2004, p. 763). Essentially, students who are not provided with adequate resources should not be held to the same standards as students who have the necessities to succeed because it is unfair and not equitable to do so (Powers, 2004).

Identification of Gifted Students

The identification of gifted students has historically relied on achievement and intelligence standardized test scores (Russell, 2018; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). However, experts in the field of gifted and talented students suggest that using multiple methods of identifying students as gifted is more appropriate because gifted and talented students display their giftedness in a variety of ways (Castejón, Gilar, Miñano, & González, 2016; Russell, 2018). Students are often identified as gifted early in their schooling and then tracked throughout the early grades and on into high school. Often, if a student has not been identified as gifted or placed in AP classes by eighth grade, he or she will sometimes be overlooked for opportunities to take higher-level classes. Further, a study conducted by Lu and Weinberg (2016) in New York City schools, showed that there are also disparities between White students and Hispanic and Black students’ rates of taking gifted placement tests in pre-K, and they suggested that this helps contribute to the achievement gap.

When nontraditional methods are used to identify potential students for AP classes, more minority students have the opportunity to participate. For example, in a study conducted by Davis et al. (2013), a school counselor, a school counselor intern, and an AP teacher aligned with one another to recruit African American students into an AP psychology class and then to provide support to these students. They used nontraditional identification methods to target

students who had shown academic promise in the past (Davis et al., 2013). The result of the study showed that a group of students who would not normally have access to an AP class can gain access and be successful if given the appropriate support (Davis et al., 2013). The study demonstrated that sometimes the students must be sought after; they may not come looking for the opportunity, because they do not necessarily know that it is available to them (Davis et al., 2013). Further, David et al.'s study highlights the need for the involvement of school counselors in the recruitment process for enrolling minority students into AP courses.

Unfortunately, many of the students who fail to be identified as gifted are—more often than not—from low socioeconomic homes or are Black or Hispanic (Del Siegle et al., 2016; Russell, 2018). According to Brayboy et al. (2007), “White students continue to have access to more and better material resources—indication that schools are unequal and inequitable” (p. 169). Lu and Weinberg (2016) confirmed that students from minority and/or low-income families are less likely to be referred for testing for gifted programs than are White students. Further, placement in AP classes “has historically discriminated on the basis of class” (Neihart, 2007, p. 336). VanTassel-Baska et al. (2007) conducted a 3-year study of students identified as gifted through performance tasks and found that more students from low socioeconomic homes and minority students were identified using the performance task assessment than would have been identified using traditional methods. However, most of the students that were identified as gifted were still from higher-income families and White (Van Tassel-Baska et al., 2007).

Minority students are less likely to be identified as gifted if they are tested using standardized intelligence tests (Thomas, 2008). The traditional methods of identifying students as gifted, such as written standardized intelligence and achievement tests, have been labeled as being biased toward different cultures, which may be one of the causes of the

underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students in AP classes (Brayboy et al., 2007; Lu & Weinberg, 2016). Often, policymakers feel that they are lowering standards of excellence to make gifted education more equal among cultures, because there are many stakeholders who believe that removing standardized test scores from the identification procedures lowers the standard for participation in AP classes. However, Ford and Harmon (2001) recommended changes that need to be made in the identification procedures of gifted students, including changes in the defining, testing, and teaching of culturally diverse students. Most educators agree that standardized testing only shows a partial picture of a student's academic ability, yet it is still the major component used in the process for identifying gifted students (Castejón et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2013). Teachers are usually quick to criticize standardized tests when it comes to dealing with the general population of students, but there has not been the same sort of criticism when it comes to using them for identifying gifted and talented students. According to Gentry and Owen (2004),

With current national and local pressures for standards, measurable achievement, and basic skills for all, it is important to remember that academic success, learning, and perceptions of accomplishment extend far beyond what is measured by standardized or standards-based achievement tests. (p. 25)

The identification of gifted and talented students should rely on multiple forms of assessments and not just standardized intelligence tests (Ambrose & Macheck, 2015; Russell, 2018). Creative and performance-based categories have been added to the identification process of gifted students in many states to increase diversity and allow students who may not qualify in one of the traditional areas have another area of possible qualification (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). Nonverbal intelligence tests have also been used to determine gifted status (Castejón et al.,

2016). VanTassel-Baska et al. (2007) suggested there should be a variety of methods used to identify students from low socioeconomic homes as gifted rather than depending on only standardized tests. Traditional standardized tests have repeatedly been criticized for their innate bias against minority and underprivileged students; however, they are still one of the most important and widely used tools when identifying students as gifted (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). C. M. Callahan (2005) proposed suggestions for improving the issue of identifying minority students as gifted. Educators must realize that often minority students may not excel in traditional school teaching methods, which creates an even greater challenge in trying to identify them as gifted (C. M. Callahan, 2005). Teachers need to be educated in this area so that gifted students from diverse backgrounds do not continue to be overlooked by gifted (C. M. Callahan, 2005; Lidz & Macrine, 2001; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). According to Lidz and Macrine (2001), research confirms that in order to identify more minority and children from low socioeconomic homes as gifted, multiple assessments must be used. Additionally, identifying gifted and talented students should extend beyond the classroom to include school counselors, healthcare providers, and other members of a child's educational community (Lu & Weinberg, 2016).

Teacher Perceptions and Identification

A major issue in the identification of minority students as gifted students lies in preconceived notions or accepted beliefs and unintended bias that teachers bring with them into the classroom (Lidz & Macrine, 2001). Students' perceptions of the support they receive from their teachers have a direct impact on their confidence and achievement in the classroom: "Many African American students perceive that they are not supported by their teachers" (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2010, p. 185). Faulkner, Stiff, Marshall, Nietfeld, and Crossland (2014) confirmed

the effect of positive teacher expectations on student achievement in a study of teacher evaluations and student enrollment in advanced math courses in high school. Van den Bergh et al. (2010) concluded that minority students' success in school is affected by the support that they feel they have from their teachers. If they do not feel that their teachers support them, they have difficulty maintaining confidence in their academic ability and performance (Pitts, 2007; Del Siegle et al., 2016). Pringle et al. (2013) conducted a study of 48 African American high school students and their perceptions of teacher expectations and concluded that most of the students in the study believed that teacher treatment of them was influenced by their race and ethnicity. Additionally, "Students reported that they were either not encouraged or blatantly discouraged from taking Advanced or honors classes" (Pringle et al., 2013). This finding was corroborated by Faulkner et al. (2014), who determined that "black students had reduced odds of being placed in Algebra by the eighth grade" (p. 302). Placement in Algebra by the eighth grade has a direct effect on a student taking higher level math courses in high school (Faulkner et al., 2014).

According to Rubin (2003), not only are the AP and honors classes disproportionately White, but they are also taught by veteran teachers, which suggests that those students who are not in the AP classes are not being provided an equitable education based on teacher quality alone (Pitts 2007; Rubin 2003). Often, the first-year and less-experienced teachers are the ones teaching the lower-level courses at the high-school level (Pitts, 2007). Further, Blanchett (2006) asserted, "Educators tend to see Whiteness as the norm and consequently the academic skills, behavior, and social skills of African American and other students of color are constantly compared with those of their White peers" (p. 27). Additionally, Van Tassel-Baska et al., (2009) conducted a study of low-income minority students and some of their teachers reported "resiliency, capable but underachieving, high-level thinking abilities, preference for targeted peer

groups, poor time management and organizational skills, family support, and family dysfunction issues as characteristics of these learners” (pp. 718–719). Often, these same teachers are White and may not recognize giftedness in minority students, which is often shown in nontraditional ways (Pitts, 2007; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2009). Also, Pitts (2007) concluded that minority students perform better when they are taught by teachers of their same race. R. M. Callahan (2005) suggested that “links the overall low academic performance of minority . . . students to less than optimal learning environments, low-level academic content and poor teacher-student relationships” (p. 311).

In a study of teacher perceptions of giftedness, Russell (2018) found that the teachers were not clear on what it means to be gifted, and many teachers reported they were not aware of research and theory in the discipline of giftedness. If teachers have wrong views of giftedness, maybe it is because of the way the term has been defined traditionally by policymakers and by those in teacher training programs (Blanchett, 2006; Brayboy et al., 2007; C. M. Callahan, 2005; Pitts, 2007). Changing legislation and definitions will not bring about change unless the changes are supported by teachers and school officials, who truly believe in them, and who will be proactive in influencing change in their schools; therefore, using multiple criteria to identify gifted students stems from the need to identify more gifted students from culturally diverse populations (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007).

Researchers have suggested that White teachers need more training and education on how to identify giftedness in minority students or students who are culturally different from them (Blanchett, 2006; Brayboy et al., 2007; C. M. Callahan, 2005; Pitts, 2007). Russell (2018) confirmed that White teachers are less aware of the challenges that minority students face in school than are Black teachers. Because many teachers in the United States are White, even in

schools where the student populations are mostly minority, they must be educated on the cultural differences of these students (Pitts, 2007). In addition, they could benefit from professional development on how to educate students who come from poverty. Most teachers in the United States come from middle-class families and bring their middle-class values into the classroom with them. However, when they are faced with students who come from low socioeconomic families, they face conflict because they lack an understanding of how to relate to these students who have been raised with different values and who place more emphasis on people and things that are necessities.

Student Perceptions

Another important issue that is prevalent in the literature on gifted education is minority students' perceptions of gifted and AP classes. Past research has suggested that some gifted minority students resist being placed in gifted and AP classes because it may be socially unacceptable in their peer groups, or they may feel that they will not be able to identify with the other students in those classes (Gayles, 2006). For example, according to Henfield et al. (2010), Black students reported "being put in a position to defend their identities as 'real' African Americans by their peers who were not enrolled in gifted and talented programs simply because they were participating in Advanced courses" (p. 18–19). However, Del Siegle et al. (2016) suggested that if Black students see education as a means of increasing their upward mobility in society, then they are more likely to value educational opportunities.

High-achieving minority students in multiple studies reported negative comments or behaviors exhibited by students in their peer groups toward them because of their participation in higher-level courses. Lovett (2011) suggested that "faced with ostracism, some African American and Latino students might choose to underperform or not to participate in gifted

classes or rigorous programs or studies” (p. 56). A student in a study conducted by Rubin (2003) expressed her desire to have it “more acceptable for [her] to have White friends . . . but unfortunately it isn’t” (p. 555). The problem is often seen in schools because so much of a student’s identity is created by his or her friends (Tyson et al. as cited in Morris & Monroe, 2009). However, Tyson et al. (as cited in Morris & Monroe, 2009) suggested, “When charges of acting White did emerge, the accusations tended to transpire in schools characterized by stark socioeconomic differences between White and Black students where White, youth-dominated enrollment in Advanced courses” (as cited in Morris & Monroe, 2009, p. 26). Saunders and Maloney (2005) found that some high-achieving minority students at Central High School in Omaha, Nebraska “felt they were sometimes viewed as sell-outs who were willing to give up their cultural identity to fit into the majority population” (p. 55) because they were successful in school. Finally, in a case study in a Southeastern high school of a high-achieving Black student, Henfield et al. (2010) found the student felt that “it [was] quite difficult to be a gifted Black student in her high school” (p. 21) because it was predominantly Black, and she had “been accused of acting White” (p. 21) because of her participation in AP classes. It is not uncommon for high-achieving minority students to be accused of *acting White*, and this phenomenon has been reported in multiple studies (Ford & Whiting, 2010; Grantham & Biddle, 2014; Henfield et al., 2010; Morris & Monroe, 2009).

On the other hand, Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones (2009) conducted research in a predominantly Black urban high school in California and found that the students there did not have the same views as those who are enrolled in mostly White schools. Nasir et al. looked at the various racial identities that Black students within the school formed for themselves and with

which they identified and noticed that the students who were enrolled in the AP courses were never accused by their peers of acting White.

These studies suggest that the type of school a student attends affects his or her perceptions of academic achievement, making it important for researchers conducting studies with regard to the achievement gap and AP courses to consider place as an integral element in scholarly research on educational equity (Morris & Monroe, 2009; Nasir et al., 2009). In a case study of five high-achieving African American males in two high schools in Florida conducted to examine their academic achievement, Gayles (2006) found that stereotype threat was consistently relevant in the lives of the young men interviewed as part of the study. One student commented that African American men are seen as “usually stupid, usually just good at sports, education isn’t their field...They don’t really have a future or anything. Usually, the biggest stereotype is just that they’re not educated” (Gayles, 2006, p. 23).

Verdugo (2011) cited research that suggested the racial and ethnic backgrounds of students are connected to low academic performance. Some students chose to stay in lower-level classes because they did not want to be considered sell-outs who left groups of people they identified with racially and socioeconomically to be in classes where they did not fit in socially (Verdugo, 2011). These students also feel “isolation and alienation in honors classes because most students . . . found it difficult to find someone in class to share day-to-day class experiences” (Saunders & Maloney, 2005, p. 55). They want to be with their friends who respect them. However, in a study focused on the U.S. South, Morris and Monroe (2009) showed that Black students’ perceptions of school success were not based on racial discrimination; they saw themselves as “popular figures traveling self-determined roads” (p. 29). It is important to note that the African American students used for this study were part of the majority race of their

school population (Morris & Monroe, 2009). In a study noted by Neihart (2007), students reported that being placed in homogeneous classrooms based on ability allowed them to increase academic achievement. Gifted students need to be in classrooms where they are challenged, and where their talents are cultivated (Henfield, Owens, & Moore, 2008). When gifted minority students are left out of gifted and AP classes, it has a detrimental effect on their talent development and opportunities in postsecondary schools (The College Board, 2011). Minority students need to feel that they are not only respected by their peers, but also by their teachers.

In a study by Rubin (2003), a student reported that because of his skin color, he received less respect than other students, and further stated that teachers had expectations for students of color that are far below those for other students. The student in Rubin's (2003) study felt that his teachers "would expect [him] to not do as well in class and stuff like that, and when people expect that of you, you kind of do what they want in a sense" (p. 554). Often, minority students will not choose to be in higher-level academic classes because they have a fear of failure (Whiting & Ford, 2001). They lack the confidence needed to enroll in these classes (Whiting & Ford, 2001). Whiting and Ford (2001) suggested that "Black students' decisions to avoid gifted education programs for social-emotional reasons also affect underrepresentation" (p. 34). Some of the lack of confidence may be attributed to their family background and the educational level of their family members. If they come from homes where neither parent has any postsecondary education, these students may feel that they do not have the support at home needed to be successful in AP classes (Verdugo, 2011). The number of resources they have at home may be limited as well.

Often, these same students do not have access to computers or the Internet at home. Additionally, "gifted African American students must often overcome additional obstacles

related to their race, due in part to the differential experience (e.g., stereotype threat, low teacher expectations)” (Henfield et al., 2008, p. 403). Further, according to Yonezawa, Stuart-Wells, & Serna (2002), some students choose to remain in lower-level classes, because they felt they had been conditioned through the years of school to have low aspirations for themselves and thus created an identity for themselves that kept them in the lower-level classes. Decuir-Gunby et al. (2010) suggested that racial identity plays an important role in the confidence of minority students: “Individuals with strong racial identity report higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and academic achievement” (p. 184). Finally, Stinson (2008) conducted a study of four academically successful African American males in which the students reported four factors that they felt helped them or led them to be successful. Those factors were (a) having family members or knowing someone directly who has achieved success, (b) high academic expectations from family and community members, (c) support from teachers and other school personnel, and (d) having friends who were high-achievers (Stinson, 2008).

Influence of Parents

Research shows that students who come from families who value education will be more successful in school (Alexander, 2002; Braid, 2009; Ford & Whiting 2001; Stewart, 2008; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007; Verdugo, 2011). Test results for Gifted Identification “show that, the more affluent the test-takers and the higher the educational level of their parents, the likelier they are to get high scores” (Braid, 2009, p. 69, para. 11). Students who have been exposed to books and other enriching learning experiences before they enter school, enter school far ahead of those students who did not have the same experiences before coming to school. Stewart (2008) suggested, “Parent-child discussion was found to be significantly associated with academic achievement, thereby suggesting that parental engagement in

education-related discussion with their children was an effective tool for increasing students' academic achievement" (p. 198). In addition, Verdugo (2011) contended that "economic status is a proxy for lack of resources. . . . Such a lack of resources and a lack of connections to an essentially middle-class institution translates into poor experiences for children from impoverished backgrounds" (p. 187). Therefore, many students begin school already far behind their peers. Unfortunately, these students tend to be from low socioeconomic homes (Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Verdugo, 2011) and are also more than likely Black or Hispanic.

Students who are read to at home and who see their parents reading or valuing education will be more likely to value it themselves than do those who do not see those behaviors in their homes. Minority students do not always have the same encouragement at home to enroll in honors and AP courses, and they often feel isolated in those classes because they do not have the same life experiences as many of the other students in their classes (Saunders & Maloney, 2005). Students who come from homes where one or both of their parents have earned a college degree are more likely to attend college or to receive postsecondary education than those do not come from such homes (Verdugo, 2011). Verdugo (2011) explained that a student's performance in school is also negatively affected by the following: parents and/or siblings who have dropped out of school, parental involvement in school activities of the student, lack of discussions between parent and child about school and homework, and lack of additional resources at home. Additionally, McDonough (2015) claimed that the age of the mother at a child's birth contributes to the achievement gap. Conversely, students whose parents are more involved in their academic endeavors are more likely to be placed in honors and AP classes by their parents. Additionally, a study of 20 minority students conducted by Huidor and Cooper (2010) showed that when minority students who live in urban areas have the opportunity to attend a suburban, mostly

White school, their parents prefer the suburban school because they feel their children will be in a safer school and be exposed to a higher quality education.

Ndura et al. (2003) concluded that after a child's teachers, parents are most influential in a child's decision to enroll in AP or honors classes. Parental influence cannot be overlooked as an important factor in a child's enrollment in gifted courses (Lovett, 2011; Ndura et al., 2003). "The role of family members, including extended family, [is a] critical support structure in stressing the value of education and a work ethic and in monitoring the child's education" (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007, p. 220), specifically for gifted students who are considered disadvantaged or who are of minority status.

Tracking and Ability Grouping

The use of tracking, which is also known as *ability grouping*, refers to the process of placing students in classes based on their ability, academic performance, and achievement. Oakes defined tracking as "the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes" (as cited in LeTendre et al., 2003, p. 44). Rubin (2003) reported "tracking re-segregates integrated schools and provides an inferior education for students in the lower tracks" (p. 541). Tracking students has been frowned upon because, more times than not, minority students are placed in lower tracked classes which are traditionally less academically sound and less likely to prepare students for college than are other higher-level classes (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Henfield et al., 2008; LeTendre et al., 2003; Pitts, 2007; Rubin, 2003; Swartz, 2009). Tracking students based on academic achievement has historically resulted in low achievement of students; however, tracking is not really the issue. The bigger issue is what happens in the tracked classes. If schools would reform the way that lower-level classes are perceived and conducted, then strides could be made to provide these

students with what they need (Pitts, 2007). According to Pitts (2007), “Minority students placed in lower tracks may suffer from low expectations and a general sentiment of giving up, but the presence of minority teachers who show a special interest in them could lead to better outcomes” (p. 504). Research by Losen and Orfield further solidifies that African American students are over-represented in special education classes: “African American students account for only 14.8% of the general population of 6-21-year old students, but they make up 20% of the special education population across all disabilities” (as cited in Blanchett, 2006, p. 24).

According to Ndura et al. (2003), “Research shows that taking AP courses in high school has positive implications for college admission and attendance” (p. 22). The exclusion of minority students from these classes puts them at a striking disadvantage in college from those who are in those classes (Ndura et al., 2003; The College Board, 2011). Further, it may inhibit them from being admitted to more prestigious colleges and universities (Brown, 2009). College admission is becoming increasingly more competitive as larger populations of students continue to seek college degrees, and because of the larger need in society for people who are highly skilled in a plethora of new careers, specifically in technology, minority students are continuing to be left behind (Henfield et al., 2008). By looking at college and university admission requirements across the United States, one can see the value for students to take AP courses.

Taking an AP course gives a student a chance to earn a GPA that is above 4.0. As a result, students who take AP courses have higher GPAs than do those students who do not take those classes. GPA and standardized test scores are two of the biggest determinants for college admission. In addition, students are required to write admissions essays that help to create a picture of who they are, and these essays are also used to evaluate a student’s critical thinking and creativity: skills that are enhanced or learned in AP classes. Therefore, students who take

AP courses and pass AP examinations have a bigger advantage in college admissions than those who do not (Davis et al., 2013; Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Studies have also shown that students who take AP courses in high school are more likely to remain in and graduate from college than those students who do not take such courses (Alexander, 2002; Moore & Slate, 2008, Ndura et al., 2003). By keeping minority students out of AP courses, teachers, parents, and other school officials are, in effect, limiting a student's choices for postsecondary education (Brown, 2009; Davis et al., 2013; The College Board, 2011). If students are tracked into low-level classes at the beginning of their high school careers, it is hard for them to get out of those classes. In addition, if they decide later that they wish to pursue college or university admission, they may find that they have not completed the appropriate courses in high school to qualify. As a result, they will have to enroll in community colleges and technical schools, which will not necessarily provide them with the same opportunities for success as adults at larger, 4-year institutions (Brown, 2009; Davis et al., 2013).

History of the AP Program

The College Board began in 1900 as an organization that established and distributed college entrance exams. Over the past century, The College Board has expanded to include many services for helping students prepare for college. One of those services is the AP program. While the Ford Foundation initially began the creation of the AP program, the College Board (2010) established the program and formed it into what it is today. The College Board began administering AP exams in May 1956 (Thompson & Rust, 2007). The AP program offers over 30 examinations in a variety of disciplines ranging from mathematics to foreign languages (The College Board, 2014). In 2009, 768,629 public high-school students took at least one AP exam,

which results in 26.5% of public high-school students (The College Board, 2010). As participation continues to grow, so does the competitiveness of college admission.

The original purpose of the AP program was to “enhance the educational experience of high achieving high school students” (Tai, 2008, p. 38). Further, the purpose was also to provide willing and able students a program that would meet their needs academically and also give them the opportunity to get a head start at college (Tai, 2008). Students who participate in the AP program can earn college credit or are able to exempt out of lower-level core classes in college by scoring a 3 out of 5 or higher on an AP exam (The College Board, 2010). Further, AP students generally have higher GPAs in college as well. In addition, according to The College Board (2011), AP students “are much more likely to earn a college degree within five years of beginning college” (p. 3), potentially saving them thousands of dollars in tuition costs. Graduating from college earlier is just one more advantage to participating in the AP program. Students who participate in the AP program receive many benefits to which they otherwise would not have access. Therefore, it is imperative that students of all ethnic, racial, and financial backgrounds have equal access to the program (The College Board, 2011). In 1998, Congress passed the Jacob J. Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act, which gives states and local education agencies additional funding to increase the enrollment of a diverse student population into programs for gifted students (Henfield et al., 2008). According to The College Board (1999), “In all of its activities, the Board promotes equity through universal access to high standards of teaching and learning and sufficient financial resources so that every student has the opportunity to succeed in college and work” (p. ii).

In recent years, the purpose for enrolling in AP courses has changed somewhat. While high-achieving students still consider the AP program a means to receive a more rigorous

education in high school, many students see it as a pathway to college admission (Burney, 2010; The College Board, 2011). In other words, if they take an AP course or courses in high school, students will have a better chance of being admitted to the college of their choice. With college admission becoming increasingly more competitive, the need for postsecondary education continues to be a must for one to be successful as an adult in the United States (Brown, 2009). However, according to Thompson and Rust (2007), “Over 40% of high schools do not offer any AP courses” (para. 4). As a result, there are many students, most of whom are minorities or come from low-income homes, who do not have the opportunity to participate in rigorous courses in high school and are put at a disadvantage when it comes to college admission, which contributes to the inequality of education in America (Brown, 2009; Strick, 2012; Swartz, 2009).

AP Minority Participation

According to the College Board’s (2011) *7th Annual Report to the Nation*, the number of students who have taken an AP course by the time they graduate high school has more than doubled since 2001 (The College Board, 2011). In 2001, 432,343 students had taken an AP exam by the time they graduated and in 2010, 853,314 students had taken at least one AP exam by the time they had graduated from high school (The College Board, 2011). Further, 508,818 students had scored at least a 3 on one exam in 2010 (The College Board, 2011). As participation in the AP program continues to increase, the issue of equity in access to the program is also on the increase (The College Board, 2014). According to research, enrollment in AP courses has grown exponentially in the past 10 years as college admission becomes increasingly more competitive (Bushong, 2009, Tai, 2008, The College Board, 2010). Students enroll in multiple AP courses to increase their chances of gaining acceptance into the top universities in the United States. In most school systems, students can earn a GPA above 4.0 for

taking AP courses. Therefore, since colleges use overall GPA for admissions requirements, those students who have access to AP courses in high school have a better chance of gaining acceptance into the top universities (Brown, 2009). However, many students across the country do not have access to AP courses and are immediately at a disadvantage when it comes to college admissions (Burney, 2010; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). Further, research shows that “African American and Hispanic students—who participated in AP programs—scored more than 100 points higher on the college entrance exam than did African American and Hispanic students who did not participate in AP programs” (Flowers, 2008, para. 10). Clearly, participation in AP courses gives students an advantage over those who do not have the opportunity to participate (Brown, 2009; Strick, 2012; Swartz, 2009).

In 2006, President G. W. Bush instituted the American Competitiveness Initiative to broaden “the accessibility of the AP program for underserved and underrepresented groups across the United States” (Tai, 2008, p. 38). This push, along with a commitment by The College Board, has helped to reduce the gap that still exists between White students and students of color and their participation in the AP program (Tai, 2008, The College Board, 2010). Minority participation in AP courses has grown over the past 5 years; however, this growth has mainly been with Hispanic and Latino students (The College Board, 2010). According to the College Board’s (2010) *6th Annual AP Report to the Nation*, 15.9% of the public-school graduating class of 2009 was Hispanic or Latino and 15.5% of them were part of the AP examinee population. On the other hand, Blacks and African Americans and Native Americans and Alaskan Natives are not participating at the same percentages. Black and African American students make up 14.5% of the public-school graduating class and only 8.2% of the AP examinee population (The College Board, 2010). Native Americans and Alaskan Natives are also

disproportionately represented in the AP examinee population with only .6% participation out of 1.2% of the graduating class (The College Board, 2010). According to the College Board (2010), “An equity and excellence gap appears when traditionally underserved students comprise a smaller percentage of the successful group than the percentage these students represent in the graduating class” (p. 2).

While the numbers show that participation in AP classes has grown for minority students overall, there is still a gap in equity, especially with African American, Black, Native American, and Alaskan Native students that is much larger than that of Latino and Hispanic students (The College Board, 2010, 2014). For Caucasian and Asian students there is essentially no gap in representation in AP courses (The College Board, 2010). If the gap has been closed for Latino and Hispanic students, why is it not closing for the other minority students? One possible cause is the lack of educational support at home. African Americans, Blacks, Native Americans, and Alaskan Natives, as a whole, lag far behind other groups in attaining a college education, and research shows that students whose parents have college degrees are more likely to earn a college degree than those whose parents do not (Alexander, 2002; Braid, 2009; Ford & Whiting 2001; Stewart, 2008; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007; Verdugo, 2011). Also, minority students who reside in rural areas are at a greater disadvantage as well: “Rural high schools frequently assign minority students and children of poverty to non-college-bound tracks on the same bases as are used in urban high schools” (Deyoung & Lawrence, 1995, para. 36). The parents of these students are often left out of decisions about their children’s academic lives.

Impact on Society

Educational inequities have far-reaching ramifications for American society. As a leading researcher in the study of underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education, Ford (2010) asserted the “underrepresentation negatively affects the lives and future of Black and Hispanic students, as well the school district, community, the state, and the nation” (p. 31). Further, Brown (2009) suggested, “The quickest route to financial wealth without coming from a wealthy family is to graduate from an Ivy League type university with a degree in law or an MBA degree from a top business school” (pp. 522–523). However, since Black and Hispanic students are graduating from college at a much lower rate than are White students, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to having access to the best-paying jobs that are awarded to those who attend such schools (Brown, 2009). McDonough (2015) also confirmed that “closing the test score gap would do more to advance racial equality in America than any other measure considered by policy makers” (p. 17). Therefore, when traditionally underrepresented groups that do not have access to the best quality education continue to be left out of rigorous courses, such as AP and honors courses, they can be negatively affected when they become adults (Brown, 2009; Verdugo, 2011). According to Brown and Hunter (2009), “In 2007, Blacks made up 5.8% of all AP test takers, but 62% of the White students had a score of 3 and above compared to only 25.4% for Black students” (p. 600). Verdugo (2011) noted, “The large gap in the achievement between White and minority students . . . doom[s] minority students to poor economic statuses later in life” (p. 200). Not only do they not have the opportunity to gain a college education, but they also are not able to attain the best-paying jobs (Brown, 2009). Further, Brown (2009) contended that a student’s educational background is a leading factor in the opportunity to manage corporations, and that will ultimately lead to personal wealth.

McDonough (2015) claimed that “gaps in cognitive measures between black and white students translate into employment and wage gaps between black and white adults, reconciling educational disparities prior to joining the labor market is key to closing the documented gap in economic outcomes” (p. 17). Black and Hispanic students are, once again, at a disadvantage. Thus, it continues the cycle of students who will come from families of which one or more parents lack a college degree or any postsecondary training. In addition, Brown and Hunter (2009) suggested that because of globalization, education has become even more important to compete with the rest of the world. For example, “foreign students and immigrants made up 50% of all science researchers in 2006, 40% of doctorates in science and engineering, and 65% of all doctorates in computer science (Brown & Hunter, 2009, p. 598). Brown and Hunter (2009) also noted “As the country becomes increasingly dependent on the global economy, America cannot afford to under educate entire segments of the population along racial or social class and remain competitive” (p. 596). All American students must be exposed to a quality education if America is going to remain the economic and political leader it has been over the last century: “Educational policymakers and members of the business community have become increasingly concerned that the United States is falling behind in its quest to maintain its position as a world power” (Henfield et al., 2008, p. 393).

According to a study conducted by the Justice Policy Institute in 2000, there are more Black men in prison or jail than in college earning degrees (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg). In addition, the study indicated that between the years 1985–2000, government spending on prisons increased to almost 6 times more than the funds states used for higher education (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2002). Schiraldi and Ziedenberg (2002) reported that government spending on prisons has quadrupled over the past 20 years. For example, between 1984 and 1994, California, a state that

has traditionally enrolled more college students than any other state, “built 21 prisons and only one state university . . . the prison system realized a 209% increase in funding, compared to a 15% increase in state university funding” (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2002, p. 4). Further,

A study by the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives showed that between 1985 and 1997 (when more than a million new prisoners were added to state and federal prisons), 70% of prison growth came from the addition of new African American and Latino prisoners. (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2002, p. 10)

These numbers show the far-reaching ramifications of the achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts (Brown, 2009; Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2002). This is a societal problem that can be assuaged with educational opportunity (Brown, 2009). If society is going to change and become equal for all groups, it will have to start with educational change (Brown, 2009). Quality education is the most reliable predictor of economic success in one’s future (Brown, 2009).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act

In 2001, President Bush introduced the NCLB Act. One of the goals of the NCLB legislation was to reduce the achievement gap between White and non-White students by ensuring that all students had access to a quality and equitable education (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Schools had to show AYP, based on several factors. AYP was measured through graduation rates, standardized test scores, attendance, and other areas to determine how well a school is performing. Additionally, AYP was used to monitor these areas in various subgroups, such as special education and minority students (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014). However, Taylor (2006) asserted that “racial categories are poorly defined, and often have confusing overlap. For example, the category ‘Latino’ lumps recent immigrants who do not speak English with

multigeneration families. The standardized tests required by the NCLB, however, are given only in English” (p. 78). According to Holbein and Ladd (2017), “one of the drawbacks of the NCLB is that it primarily relies on standardized test scores to measure academic progress. Moreover, Sherman’s (2008) ethnographic study of Virginia superintendents’ perceptions regarding the success of measures instituted by the NCLB showed that “the majority of superintendents were uncomfortable recognizing the notion that achievement gaps have anything to do with race or ethnicity” (p. 687).

The NCLB legislation affects every level of K-12 education and at the high school level, the intent of NCLB is to identify high schools where students are not achieving at proficient levels of academic skills and/or graduating with a regular high school diploma in the standard number of years. (Balfanz et al., 2007, pp. 559–560)

Schools must show that the subgroups are achieving at the same rate as other groups (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Harris and Herrington (2006) examined the effects of educational reform over the previous 50 years, concluding that positive results should occur because of the NCLB legislation as it is grounded in reforms, such as teacher quality and increased testing, that has helped schools show progress in educational reform in the past. The authors also noted there were a few drawbacks to the NCLB, such as a chance that states will not require enough rigor or that high-quality teachers will not want to work at low-performing schools (Herrington & Harris, 2006). Additionally, Holbein and Ladd (2017) studied the effects of the NCLB on student behaviors and found that minority and low-performing students are more negatively affected than are other students. In addition, Brown and Hunter (2009) suggested “that the government stop funding specific school-based programs [such as NCLB]

and provide funding to local school districts based on the number of economically disadvantaged students” (p. 613). This idea would have a greater impact on improving the education of all students by providing students from low socioeconomic homes with the support they need to be successful (Brown & Hunter, 2009).

Almost 20 years have passed since the NCLB legislation was instituted, and the achievement gap between White and non-White students still exists (Gaddis & Lauen, 2014). Research shows that the gap has been somewhat reduced; however, it is still large and, based on the actual data, it may be that schools and school districts have found ways of statistically reducing the gap, but in the end are doing more harm than good, especially to students of color (Darling-Hammond, 2007a; Lee, 2002; Roach, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Verdugo, 2010; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). In addition, the NCLB legislation does not monitor the AP program and how many minority and low-income students are enrolled in the program. However, to determine if all children are being given an equitable education, it is appropriate to consider AP enrollment data as well (The College Board, 2011).

The push to raise participation in AP courses for minority and low-income students has come from other areas (The College Board, 2011). However, it has been influenced and affected by the NCLB simply because the achievement gap is being addressed, and one way to attempt to reduce the gap is through access to AP courses for a more diverse population of students (The College Board, 2011). Additionally, the NCLB only requires that the achievement gap be reduced and that minority students achieve at higher levels (Darling-Hammond, 2007a). While this looks good in theory, many school systems only focus their efforts on raising the achievement of low-performing students, not on providing new challenges and support for high-performing minority students or even giving them the same support as low-performing students.

Darling-Hammond (2007a) stated that there are many consequences of the NCLB legislation such as a “narrowed curriculum, focused on the low-level skills generally reflected on high stakes tests; inappropriate assessment of English language learners and students with special needs; and strong incentives to exclude low-scoring students from school, so as to achieve test-score targets” (p. 245). Usually, what takes place in school systems that have been forced through legislation to raise achievement of minority students—which mostly means raising test scores, school attendance, and graduation rates—is to give teachers more training, institute programs to motivate low-performing students, increase school-wide test preparation, and provide tutoring opportunities (Artiles, 2011). These practices are a step in the right direction, but they must not be the only initiatives, and they certainly do not assure that students are receiving a quality education. For example, raising test scores through test prep does not necessarily mean that students are achieving at higher levels; it could just mean they have learned how to prepare better and take tests. In addition, some school systems have tried to increase the number of students with disabilities taking alternative assessments and could “alleviate the accountability pressures on schools through the placement of racial minority students in special education, thus contributing to the racialization of disability” (Artiles, 2011, p. 437).

On the other hand, the NCLB has also resulted in other, less than stellar and possibly unethical practices by school systems and school officials. In some school systems at the high-school level, students who are repeatedly absent and are not achieving at a passing level are being encouraged to drop out of school and pursue their GEDs instead of remaining enrolled in school, thereby reducing the percentage of students who are absent from school (Darling-Hammond, 2007a). Removing these students who are repeatedly absent from the school’s roster

makes it appear that attendance rates have increased. However, in truth, the absent students are no longer counting against a school's attendance rates because they are no longer there. For example, in New York City during the "2000-01 school year, more than 55,000 high school students were discharged without graduating . . . and GED programs increased by more than 50%" (Darling-Hammond, 2007a, p. 254). The practice of encouraging students to leave high school and get their GED is just one way that schools can manipulate the system into believing that they have increased attendance and, therefore, improved the school (Darling-Hammond, 2007a). Conversely, those students who drop out will cause a school's graduation rates to drop, but if school administrators know they will not be able to achieve the prescribed graduation rate anyway, it seems beneficial to them to encourage the students to drop out and not be too concerned about the graduation rate since it is only one of the areas monitored under the NCLB (Darling-Hammond, 2007a).

In addition, those students with poor attendance are also the ones who often do not perform as well on standardized tests and are students of color or low socioeconomic status (Darling-Hammond, 2007a). According to Harris and Herrington (2006), "There is already some evidence, for instance, that these policy approaches decrease graduation rates even when they increase the achievement of those who stay in school" (p. 214). Darling-Hammond (2007a) reported that in some areas of the United States, the NCLB has negatively impacted the very students it was designed to protect; there are many schools with large or mostly minority populations that are operating under conditions that resemble those of pre- *Brown v. Board of Education* days (Darling-Hammond, 2007a). These schools are losing funding because they are not making AYP, and the result is a lack of resources for the students, including the ability to

entice highly qualified and veteran teachers to poor-performing schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007a).

The AYP is used to measure the achievement of predetermined subgroups (Darling-Hammond, 2007a). However, for a population of students to be considered a subgroup, the students in the subgroup must be a certain number or percentage of the student population. The reason this results in a problem is that there may be a low-performing group of students in a school, but there are not enough of them to make a subgroup. Therefore, there is no regulation according to AYP to focus efforts to raise the achievement of those students, which results in those students not being given any kind of remediation. For example, a school may have a minority population of students who are not achieving at the levels required by the NCLB; however, since the group of students is not a large enough number to constitute a subgroup, they may be overlooked by the school as a part of their school improvement plan. As a result, the school may, in fact, make AYP, but still have a large group of students who are not achieving at the appropriate levels. The school would not have any responsibility to raise the achievement of that specific group under the NCLB legislation.

Racial Achievement Gap on Advanced Placement Exams

Over the past 20 years, there has been a steady increase in the overall enrollment in AP courses for all groups of students (The College Board, 2010). However, The College Board released a study in 2005 reporting that increased participation in AP courses does not necessarily mean that students are doing well in the classes, passing the exams, and being prepared for success in college (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2005). In addition, the underrepresentation of African American and Black students persists (The College Board, 2014). Ford and Whiting (2010) reported that Black males are the most underrepresented group in gifted education. When

African American and Black students are enrolled in AP courses, they are still well behind White and Asian students in success on the exams (The College Board, 2010). According to the *6th Annual AP Report to the Nation* (The College Board, 2010), African American and Black students are not performing as well as White and Asian students on AP exams. In 2009, 15.9% of public-school students who took an AP exam received a score of 3 or higher (The College Board, 2010). However, only 3.7% of African American and Black students were successful on the AP exam with a score of 3 or higher (The College Board, 2010). In addition, The College Board (2010) reported that only two states, Hawaii and Montana, had been successful over the previous 5 years in closing the achievement gap between White students and African American and Black students.

The College Board's (2011) *7th Annual Report to the Nation* did not show much change in attempts at reaching equity and excellence. The College Board (2011) created a formula to determine if states had achieved equity and excellence. To determine if equity and excellence had been achieved, the percentage of the graduating class scoring 3 or higher on at least one AP exam in high school who are of an identified race and or ethnicity is divided by the percent of that particular race or ethnicity in the overall graduating class (The College Board, 2011). The resulting percentage is used by The College Board to determine if progress is being achieved (The College Board, 2011). The data show that the states that have been the most successful in achieving equity and excellence in AP participation and success for African American or Black students are the states with low populations of those students (The College Board, 2011). Hawaii, South Dakota, Idaho, and New Mexico—states with small populations of African American or Black students—are the only states that have achieved a score of 70% or higher using The College Board's (2011) formula. The U.S. South has the largest population of African

American and Black students; however, out of the eight southern states, only Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana are above the U.S. average of 26.7% in terms of reaching equity and excellence (The College Board, 2011). Georgia has made the most progress and is only at 33.3% (The College Board, 2011). Black and African American students made up 14.6% of the graduating class of 2010, but only 3.9% were successful on an AP exam (The College Board, 2011). In addition, The College Board (2011) examined the number of students in the graduating class but did not consider the students who drop out of high school. Since Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino students make up the largest population of high school dropouts, The College Board's (2011) statistics could contain some bias. In addition, The College Board (2011) data only show information about public schools; they do not include data from private schools. While the *7th Annual Report* showed the continued achievement gap for Black or African American students, it showed almost no gap for Hispanic or Latino students (The College Board, 2011). However, because the AP exam that most Hispanic or Latino students take is for the Spanish language, the data on Hispanic or Latino students could be biased as well (The College Board, 2011, 2014).

Now that strides have been made in reducing the underrepresentation of minority and low-income students in AP classes, the College Board, as well as local school districts, has made increasing the success in the AP courses a priority for all students (The College Board, 2011; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). It is not enough to enroll more students of color in AP courses; programs and policies should be put into place by schools and school districts that focus on helping AP students of all backgrounds to be more successful in AP courses and on AP exams (The College Board, 2011). Minority and low-income students who are in gifted and AP courses often require more support from their schools because of a lack of resources at home.

Using the South for Optimal Research on Black Achievement

Texas, California, and New York have so far constituted the sites for the most educational research (Morris & Monroe, 2009), primarily because they are the most populated states. However, the South comprises the largest population of African American and Black students (Morris & Monroe, 2009). The historical significance of research in the South cannot be overlooked, either (Morris & Monroe, 2009). “The cultural expressions, patterns, and identities associated with African American people evolved greatly in response to White racism and social, political, and economic oppression and inequality” (Morris & Monroe, 2009, p. 23) in the South, which must have an impact on students today even though American society today does not reflect the same values. Therefore, it is important to conduct research regarding the achievement gap in the places where most minority students live (Morris & Monroe, 2009). Further, it can provide more conclusive data on why minority students are not achieving at the same rate as White students (Morris & Monroe, 2009). Morris and Monroe (2009) contended that the South is an optimal place for studying the plight of African American life because of the “unique economic and social opportunities” (p. 24) they are provided in the region. Of the southern states, Georgia has the smallest difference in the achievement gap between minority and White students and that gap is still over 13% (The College Board, 2009). In addition, according to the College Board (2009), Mississippi has the largest gap of the southern states at almost 40%.

Brown and Hunter (2009) described the Parents Involved case of 2007—which resulted in legislation that keeps the courts from assigning students to schools not near their homes, based on race—could result in more segregated schools; they were concerned that it would stop the process of busing, which is often used to integrate schools. In addition, Brown and Hunter (2009) are concerned with the negative effects that happened after the end of legal segregation.

For example, because of *Brown v. Board of Education* “in the Southern states, White parents removed their children from the public schools and enrolled them in private academies . . . [which] resulted in poorly funded K-12 schools for both races” (Brown & Hunter, 2009, p. 607). In the Southern states, especially in urban areas, Whites and Blacks still live in segregated communities, which are mostly divided by poverty levels. The Black families often live in the older, poorer areas and sometimes in government-assistance homes while the White families are living in the new developments and sending their children to private schools outside of the areas where they live. These dynamics that are unique to the South contribute to the reason the South is a prime place for educational research related to educational equity (Morris & Monroe, 2009).

Summary

African American and Hispanic students are underrepresented in AP and honors courses as compared to Caucasian and Asian students (Davis et al., 2013; Ford, 2010; Henfield et al., 2010; The College Board, 2010; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). Most African American and Hispanic students live and attend school in the American South; however, there is not much research that has taken place in this part of the country (Morris & Monroe, 2009). Further, there is research that suggests that racism and teacher bias are the reasons for such disproportionate numbers (Lidz & Macrine, 2001). However, identification measures for determining if students qualify as gifted have historically relied on standardized tests that have been criticized for their innate bias towards minorities. The present study was conducted to determine factors that may have an impact on a student being enrolled in an AP course by describing the experiences of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students' experiences in honors and AP courses in a Georgia private high school. Minority students, specifically African American and Hispanic students, are generally overrepresented in the lower-level and special education classes (Carbonaro & Gamoran, 2002; Henfield et al., 2008; LeTendre et al., 2003; Pitts, 2007; Rubin, 2003; Swartz, 2009). However, those same students are often underrepresented in honors and AP classes (Davis et al., 2013; Ford, 2010; Grantham et al., 2014; Henfield et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2015; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; The College Board, 2014, VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007). From past research it is evident that there is an underrepresentation of minority students, specifically African American and Hispanic, in gifted, honors and AP classes (Davis et al., 2013; Ford, 2010; Grantham & Biddle, 2014; Henfield et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2015; Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019; The College Board, 2014, VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007).

This chapter encompasses a detailed explanation of the research methods used during the study. Included is a discussion of the (a) design, (b) participants, (c) setting, (d) procedures, (e) researcher's role, (f) collection (g) data analysis, (h) trustworthiness, and (i) ethical considerations.

Design

The study utilized a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). According to Moustakas (1994), "The empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for effective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (p.

16). Therefore, using a phenomenological design to understand the perceptions of the participants and their unique personal experiences was appropriate. Further, transcendental phenomenological studies “aim . . . to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 17). I conducted individual interviews with the participants and explored the meaning of the experiences from the participants’ points of view. Because of my previous direct relationship with students and teachers involved in honors, gifted, and AP courses, I had some preconceived ideas about why certain phenomena occur in these courses. Therefore, it was important that I bracketed my personal bias out of the data analysis and focused on analyzing and interpreting the experiences of the participants aside from my own personal experiences.

It is more relevant for research related to student perceptions to be conducted through an interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews are more appropriate for gathering real-life experience and beneficial information on the given topic as opposed to simply asking students to rate various statements on a 5-point scale, for example. I asked the student participants open-ended questions and all students were asked the same list of questions. To establish triangulation, I used focus groups, individual interviews, and the participants chosen for the individual interviews kept journals of their experiences in their honors and AP classes during the research study (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of Hispanic and Black students in Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

Research Subquestions (SQs)

- SQ1.** How do high-achieving Hispanic and Black students describe their experiences in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?
- SQ2.** What factors impact the success of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?
- SQ3.** What factors impact a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student's decision to enroll in an honors or Advanced Placement (AP) course?
- SQ4.** What factors impact a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student's decision not to enroll in an honors or Advanced Placement (AP) course?
- SQ5.** What challenges do High Achieving Hispanic and Black students face in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

Setting

The educational setting of a student can have a direct impact on his or her academic success. The school chosen for this study was purposely chosen because I worked at the location and previously chosen sites denied me the ability to conduct the study at their location for various reasons. One system would not allow me to complete the research because I did not work in the system, one system did not allow me to research, because they felt that they did not have enough students who met the participant criteria to keep the identities of the participants private, and two systems did not give a reason for their refusal to participate in the study.

The setting used for the study was a private high school in Georgia, identified in the present study as Georgia Private High School (GPHS). The high school is part of a larger conglomeration of three schools—a lower school that includes PreK-3 through fifth grade, a middle school that includes sixth through eighth grade and an upper school that includes Grades

9–12. GPHS, along with several other private schools in the area, was originally created after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s when the governor of Georgia encouraged the creation of private schools to preserve segregation. However, at the time of this study, school officials were making successful concentrated efforts to recruit and enroll students from more diverse backgrounds—specifically Black students. GPHS is made up of nearly 900 students with around 360 students enrolled in the upper school. According to *Georgia Family Magazine* (2019), GPHS offers 20 AP courses, and has an AP participation rate of 67%, with a 73% pass rate of AP exams. Additionally, the school has a 100% graduation rate and college acceptance rate for graduates.

The leadership structure of the school consists of a headmaster, associate headmaster, and chief financial officer (CFO). The headmaster is directly governed by a board of directors that rotates on a 2-year term schedule. Principals of the lower school, middle school and upper school are led by the headmaster, associate headmaster, and CFO. Each grade level in the lower school is headed by a lead teacher and teachers in the middle and upper schools are led by department heads for each subject area. Additionally, the principals make all faculty hiring recommendations to the headmaster, associate headmaster, and CFO. The board of directors does not get involved in teacher hiring, they only work with the headmaster to oversee the schools.

Participants

I used purposive sampling in this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, because I sought to choose participants who had the same characteristics, and who would bring insight and understanding to the study through their specific experiences (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, “purposive sampling is suitable for

qualitative studies where the researcher interested in informants who have the best knowledge concerning the research topic” (Elo et al., 2014, p. 4). Homogeneous sampling was employed to select Hispanic and Black high school students in Grades 9–12 who had a 3.0 or higher GPA and who were enrolled in at least one honors or AP course; both female and male minority students were chosen for the study. Homogeneous sampling was important because I sought to identify the attitudes and judgments of this subgroup (Ary et al., 2006). I identified the students through personal knowledge of their conformity to the previously stated characteristics. I wrote a letter of invitation to participate in the study to the students who fit the selection criteria. Because students under the age of 18 were part of this study, it was necessary to get a letter of permission from the parents of the students. To decrease the redundancy of responses by the participants, I invited 11 students to participate in the study.

Procedures

Before the research process began, I obtained permission from two agencies under which the research took place. As a graduate student at Liberty University, I first obtained permission from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A). Because this study used human subjects as a part of the research, the IRB had to grant me permission to conduct the study. Also, before I conducted the study in GPHS, I obtained written approval from the associate headmaster of the school where I conducted the study (see Appendix B). After permission was obtained from the school, I gave letters of invitation to participants who met the criteria for the study (see Appendix C). Next, participants’ parents were given letters requesting their consent for students to participate in the interviews (see Appendix D). Each student was given a consent letter for his or her parent to sign, and each letter was returned to me signed by the parent of the participant before the student began participating in the study. Once I received

consent letters from the parents of the participants, I began collecting data through the focus group interviews, followed by data collection through individual interviews (see Appendix E). I asked the participants in the individual interviews to also keep a 4-week journal of their experiences in the honors and AP courses (see Appendix F).

Researcher's Role

At the time the study was conducted, I taught 11th grade AP language and composition and 11th grade college preparatory American literature at GPHS. Additionally, I am the English Department Head and mentor for all new teachers. Before my teaching assignment at GPHS, I taught Grades 6–12 in public schools in the state of Georgia for 12 years. During that time, I taught honors and gifted courses for 7 years. Of those 7 years, 2 years were spent teaching AP literature. I am a gifted and AP certified teacher. In 2008, when I began thinking about what I wanted to research for my doctoral dissertation, I was teaching honors and AP courses in a school with a minority population of close to 40%; however, I noticed that in my honors and AP courses the minority population was only around 10% or less. Additionally, the percentage of Hispanic and Black students in the inclusion classes I was teaching was closer to 40%, which was close to the minority population of the school. As a result, I started to contemplate why this was occurring and this began my inquiry into the area of the achievement gap between White students and students of color, specifically Hispanic and Black Students, and the underrepresentation of Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP classes.

Because of my direct relationship with students and teachers involved in honors, gifted, and AP courses, I may have had some preconceived ideas about why certain phenomena occur in AP courses. Therefore, it was important that I bracketed out my personal bias and focused on analyzing and interpreting the experiences of the participants aside from my own personal

experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Moustakas (1994), “Following a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as Epoche process)” (p. 27). This guided me “to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). As a result, I focused on the participants and their points of view without bringing in my own ideas and beliefs about why the phenomenon occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is the heart of transcendental phenomenological studies: allowing the participants’ unique experiences to be conveyed through their own voices (Moustakas, 1994).

I conducted my research in the school where I was teaching at the time I conducted the study. As a result, there were participants who had previously taken my course or who were still enrolled in my courses at the time data were collected for the study.

Data Collection

Because I sought to interpret and understand the experiences of students, I used focus group interviews, individual interviews, and student journals as the methods of inquiry to elicit the unique personal experiences from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By using focus group interviews, personal interviews, and student journals, I sought to establish methodological triangulation of the data collected (Elo et al., 2014).

Focus Group Interview

For this study, a focus group was defined as a group of student participants who have common characteristics, whom I interviewed in a group setting using the list of open-ended interview questions as follows:

1. Describe your hobbies and interests.

2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What courses are you currently taking?
4. Have you ever been recommended by a teacher, or other school personnel to take honors, gifted, or Advanced Placement courses?
5. For the honors, gifted or Advanced Placement courses that you have taken, how did you get into those classes?
6. Have you ever been asked to take an honors or Advanced Placement class, but chosen not to do so?
7. What do you think is the process or steps to be able to take honors, gifted or Advanced Placement courses at your school?
8. If you wanted to take honors, gifted or Advanced Placement courses, what steps would you take to get into the class?
9. Describe your experiences with teachers and students in your honors, gifted, and Advanced Placement classes.
10. How do your peers react to you being in an honors or Advanced Placement class?
11. Describe your relationships with other students who are in your Advanced Placement, honors, or gifted courses as compared to your relationships with students in the other courses that you have taken.
12. Describe your feelings about how accepted you are by the other members of your class who are also in honors, gifted, and Advanced Placement classes.
13. How are Advanced Placement, honors, or gifted classes that you have taken different from other classes that you have taken?

14. Describe the differences between the Advanced Placement, honors, or gifted classes that you have taken with regards to the expectations placed on you by the teachers.
15. Describe the level of difficulty and rigor in the content and coursework required in Advanced Placement, honors, or gifted courses as compared to other classes that you have taken.
16. Describe the support you receive in school academically as a gifted student.
17. Describe your parents' involvement in your education.
18. What are your parents' degrees and careers?
19. Do you have any final comments on the topics discussed in this interview?

A focus group of seven high-achieving Hispanic and Black students, as defined by a 3.0 GPA and current or past participation in at least one AP or honors class, was created. The purpose of the focus group was to test the questions by asking the focus group the same questions that were asked in the individual interviews. By asking the focus group the same questions asked in the individual interviews, I had the opportunity to create additional questions that addressed the experiences of the students in honors, gifted, and AP courses.

According to Morgan (1994), the use of focus groups with individual interviews is a common practice in qualitative research. "Investigators' reasons for combining individual and group interviews typically point to the greater depth of the former [individual interview] and the greater breadth of the latter [group interview]" (Morgan, 1994, p. 134). Using focus groups as a "pre-interview may help to determine whether the interview questions are suitable for obtaining rich data that answer the proposed research questions" (Elo et al., 2014, p. 4). Further, Morgan argued that two strengths of using the focus group are that "the participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other . . . [and] the researcher's ability to ask the

participants themselves for comparisons among their experiences and views, rather than aggregating individual data to speculate whether or why the interviewees differ” (p. 139).

Further, the focus group interviews allowed me to determine that the information obtained from the questions addressed the topics and issues that I sought to identify in this study.

Individual Interviews

I created a list of questions for the students to answer, and the interview questions were reviewed by 10 experts in the field of educational research and gifted education. Additionally, the questions were reviewed by the dissertation committee for this study. I recorded the interviews using video and audio recordings, and I also took notes during the interviews to record my thoughts and any additional questions or ideas to address with the participants. Using focus groups, individual interviews, and student journals was very important to the qualitative nature of the research study. Participants were able to speak freely about their first-hand experiences with the honors and AP classes in a nonthreatening environment. Further, I chose in-person interviews because they have a higher percentage of response rates as opposed to telephone interviews, computer or web-based questionnaires and mailed questionnaires. It also increased the likelihood that the original sample of participants would provide enough information for the study. Further, the interview process allowed me to obtain large amounts of information that could not be given through other data collection processes such as observations or the study of artifacts.

Because I conducted the individual interviews one-on-one with the participants, I could ask questions based on the actual responses of the participants instead of being limited to just the questions that would be listed on a survey or take-home interview. Further, I was able to get clarification on ideas expressed and comments made by the participants that would not be

possible in other interview processes. However, one drawback that may have resulted is that the participant could have felt the need to answer questions in a way that would please me. Here again, it was important for me to keep my personal biases out of the interview, so I would not affect the validity and reliability of the research method.

The student questions were meant to encourage students to share their experiences in honors, gifted, and AP courses. Additionally, the questions were intended to see if students understood policies and procedures that their schools used to recommend students for honors, gifted, and AP courses.

Question 1 was asked to attempt to help the student to feel comfortable in the environment of the interview by having him or her discuss personal hobbies and interests. The purpose of student Question 2 was to establish the ethnicity of the student. Question 3 was asked to give me background information about the courses in which the participant was enrolled. Questions 4–8 addressed whether the student had been recommended for an honors, gifted, or AP course by a teacher or other school personnel, and to establish if the student knew the procedures for enrolling in one of these classes (Van-Tassel Baska et al., 2007). Some students may be placed in honors, gifted, or AP courses because they have chosen to, or their parents have recommended that they take the course, and they have not been recommended by teachers or other school personnel.

Next, Questions 10–16 referred specifically to the student's peer group and/or teachers and how the feelings or knowledge of the peer group and/or teachers may have affected the student's reason for enrolling or not enrolling in honors, gifted, or AP classes (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2010). Further, Question 12 was asked to see if the student would reveal any types of negative behaviors that he or she may have felt or sensed from the other students in the honors,

gifted, or AP course (Gayles, 2006). Questions 13 and 14 addressed the student's thoughts and feelings about what his or her place was in the honors, gifted, or AP classroom. Question 16 was included to find out if the student felt that he or she was supported as a minority student in honors, gifted, and AP classes (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2010; Gayles, 2006).

Question 17 addressed the parental involvement that the student had while in high school. This question was asked intentionally to see if the student was supported at home and helped by a parent to gain access to an honors, gifted, or AP course even if the course had not been recommended by a teacher or other school personnel (Alexander, 2002; Braid, 2009; Stewart, 2008).

Finally, Questions 18 and 19 were added after the focus group interview. Question 18 specifically asked the students to describe their parents' educational backgrounds and careers. During the focus group interview, I realized that all of the participants had the common characteristic of at least one parent with a college degree. Although I had not specifically asked about their parents' educational backgrounds, I had some previous knowledge of the parents' educational backgrounds and even more emerged in the focus group interview. Therefore, to explore the issue further, I added the question. Further, during the Focus Group interview the participants often added additional details and information that I had not asked for, so I created Question 19 as I thought it would be beneficial and relevant to ask the participants if they had any comments they wanted to add after I had completed my questions.

Participant Journals

I asked the participants to keep a journal for 4 weeks, to record their experiences in the honors and AP courses they were enrolled in at the time of the study. According to Haymen, Wilkes, and Jackson (2012), "Journaling is used in phenomenological research studies to record

participant experiences in their natural contexts” (“Abstract”). Because six of the participants were in college at the time of the individual interviews and at the time they were asked to keep journals, it had been 3 months to 1 year since the participants participated in a high school honors or AP course. As a result, only one of the participants enrolled in college at the time of the individual interview completed the journal. Further, only one of the four participants enrolled in high school during the individual interview and journal task completed all four journals. However, all four of those high school participants completed at least one journal response. Therefore, there were not enough journal responses for me to be able to establish credibility and validity of the data, or even have enough “rich data” (Elo et al., 2014, p. 4). Haymen et al. (2012) identified challenges and solutions to those challenges that researchers need to be aware of when using journaling as a data collection method. The challenges related to the participants keeping the journals are (a) poor participation, (b) feeling exposed, (c) staying on track (Haymen et al., 2012). Therefore, researchers are encouraged to coach the participants, limit the amount of time the journals are used, maintain regular contact with the participants, promote comfort, increase safety, and clarify content expectations (Haymen et al., 2012). Although I gave the participants reminders about turning in the journals, most of them did not follow through with completing all four journal responses.

Data Analysis

One data analysis method suggested by Moustakas (1994) is a modification of van Kaam’s method. The steps in van Kaam’s method of data analysis are horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: validation, and textural and structural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994, Ch. 7, pp. 3–4). I followed

van Kaam's method as I analyzed the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, I listened to or reviewed all the data collected through focus group interviews, individual interviews, and participant journals. Next, I organized the data by the methods. The methods used were focus group interviews, individual interviews, and participant journals. I then transcribed the focus group interviews and each of the individual interviews by listening to the video and/or audio recordings of each interview. This process also gave me the opportunity to become more familiar with the data collected. According to Ary, Jacobs, Sorrenson-Irvine, and Walker (2019), "The researcher should become familiar with the data, for example, by reading and rereading notes and transcripts" (p. 457). After all, interviews were checked for transcription errors, I continued to review the interview transcriptions and began keeping a reflective log to record my thoughts and ideas.

Next, I coded the data collected through the focus groups, individual interviews, and participant journals. I began coding the data using the recurring themes and concepts that emerged from the focus group interviews, individual interviews, and participant journals (Ary et al., 2019). Once I identified the recurring themes, I organized the information by theme (see Table 1) so that I could begin making meaning out of the data (Ary et al., 2019)

I then summarized the findings and began to create themes and relationships from the data so the meaning of the data could be analyzed appropriately (Ary et al., 2019). Ary et al. (2019) suggested that "the most common approach is to read and reread all of the data and sort them by looking for units of meaning—words, phrases, sentences, subjects' ways of thinking, behavior patterns and events that seem to appear regularly" (p. 458).

Finally, I interpreted the data by comparing the research questions to the data collected (Ary et al., 2019). I answered the research questions and reported the findings of the study.

Trustworthiness

To ensure that the data collected in this qualitative study were valid, I had to accurately describe the findings and present them in a factual way. Therefore, following is a description of how I established credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability. Further, I used multiple forms of data collection to ensure that the data painted an accurate picture of the findings of the study and addressed the research questions.

Credibility

One way of ensuring that the data collected in a qualitative study are valid is by establishing triangulation. According to Guion et al. (2011),

Validity, in qualitative research, refers to whether the findings of a study are true and certain... Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives. (p. 1)

Therefore, I employed methodological triangulation in the study. The data collection methods of focus group interviews, individual interviews, and participant journals were used to establish triangulation of the data. By using three methods of data collection, I could compare the data and “if the conclusions from each of the methods are the same, then validity is established” (Guion et al., 2011, p. 2).

Additionally, Dey (Ary et al., 2006) suggested asking questions to guide an examination of the validity of the data collected. Therefore, I needed to determine if the data were based on first-hand observations, if the data were corroborated by others, the circumstances surrounding the report, the reliability of the people providing the data, the motivating influences on

participants to report the data, and any bias that may have influenced the reporting of the observations (Ary et al., 2006)

Dependability and Confirmability

I had the research findings reviewed by professionals in the field of education and educational research to obtain corroboration that the information was valid and credible. My previous knowledge was bracketed out and I “set aside my own experiences” (Ary et al., 2019, p. 415) to focus on the unique personal experiences of the students and to make meaning of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, I used participant feedback to make sure that the beliefs, feelings, and comments of the participants were accurately reported and that the comments made by the participants conveyed the experience they were trying to express in their interviews. In addition, I used direct quotes from the participants as much as possible to assure accuracy in my reporting.

Transferability

For future replications of this study to occur, I clearly and succinctly described the setting, participants, and findings of this study. As a result, future research on this topic can be conducted and/or replicated in other school districts. The more detail provided, the more likely the study will be consistent in other areas.

Ethical Considerations

According to Moustakas (1994), “researchers must follow ethical principles by recogniz[ing] the necessity of confidentiality and informed consent and develop[ing] procedures for full disclosure of the nature, purpose, and requirements of the research” (p. 109) to the participants. Therefore, I employed the following ethical considerations during the study. I have kept all digital data stored on my password-protected personal computer. Additionally, any hard

copies of research documents have been kept in a locked fireproof box that only I have access to. In the participation letters given to each participant I clearly stated that there would be no compensation for their participation in the study. I made every effort possible to keep the participants' names confidential. However, I cannot ensure total anonymity because the participants are known by me and the associate headmaster, and there are very few Hispanic and Black students who have attended GPHS in the last 5 years and even fewer who have participated in AP and honors classes. I changed the names of the participants and the research site in the final research report.

Additionally, I had a teacher-student relationship with each of the participants. Before interviewing each participant, I assured those who were still students in my class that the information they gave would in no way affect their grades in class and that I would keep their identities confidential in any written reports. Further, as I interviewed each participant, I only asked the predetermined interview questions. I did not respond to participants' answers to my questions with personal comments, or views or comments related to the topics discussed in the interviews. I left my point of view out of the interviews by not engaging in conversations with the participants during the interview process. At the conclusion of the study, I provided the school administration with a written report of the research study. I also obtained permission to conduct research (see Appendix A) and completed the research application from Liberty University, the institution where I am enrolled. I filled out the appropriate forms and provided a copy of the research proposal for the IRB. Because minors were included in the study, I obtained informed consent from the parents of all participants who were minors and had those signed before the research study took place.

Summary

I chose a qualitative transcendental phenomenology for this study because I was interested in the lived experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. A focus group interview, individual interviews, and participant journals were used to collect data from 11 high-achieving Hispanic and Black students about their experiences in honors and AP courses. Finally, I used van Kaam's method of data analysis to organize the data into understandable and relevant themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students' lived experiences while taking AP and honors courses. By interviewing Black and Hispanic students who participated in these courses, I hope to increase understanding of the phenomenon and gain knowledge of the characteristics of the participants by addressing the present gap in research. Additionally, I hope to identify and encourage more Black and Hispanic students to take honors and AP courses in high school. By increasing participation in these courses, the achievement gap between Black and Hispanic and White students may decrease.

The data were collected from 11 participants primarily through individual interviews. However, each of the participants was also asked to keep a journal of their classroom experiences in honors and AP courses during a 4-week period. Additionally, seven participants took part in a focus group interview at the beginning of the study to test the validity and reliability of the interview questions to be used for the individual interviews and to establish a point of departure for the individual interviews. Before I began collecting data, I received approval from Liberty University's IRB (Appendix A). Additionally, I received permission from the research site, GPHS (Appendix B). Finally, students were provided letters of invitation to participate in the study (Appendix C) and because each of the students was aged 18 or younger when they began participating in the study, their parents were asked to sign consent letters (Appendix D). Once I received IRB approval and approval from the GPHS assistant headmaster, I began the data collection process by inviting seven participants to take part in a focus group interview. The focus group met for two 1-hour sessions. During the focus group interviews, the

participants answered questions similar to those that were eventually used in the individual interviews. Following the focus group interviews, the next data collection methods I used were individual interviews and journal responses.

Participants

At the time data were collected for the study, all the participants were current high school students or college students who had graduated high school within the past 2 years. Of the participants, 10 were African American, and one was mixed-race (African American and Puerto Rican). All 11 participants had attended a private school and some of them had also attended public school. Each student had maintained at least a 3.0 GPA while in high school and had also taken multiple honors and AP courses. Two of the students in the study were male and nine of the students were female. Seven of the students were currently attending college, with four in their sophomore year of college and three in their freshman year. Of the high school students, three were juniors and one was a senior.

Amanda

At the time of the study, Amanda was a junior at GPHS. She began attending GPHS when she was in sixth grade. She briefly left GPHS to begin her sophomore year elsewhere; however, she returned to GPHS in November of the same year. Amanda is the oldest of two children and her younger brother also attends GPHS. Her mother is a former administrator and teacher of elementary school and has a specialist degree in special education. Her father is a doctor and practices podiatry. Her father is an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago. Amanda noted that her parents have high expectations of her and encourage her to do well in school. She only took one AP course and one honors course in her junior year. However, when I asked her about her experiences in AP and honors classes, she said, "I'm not going to die if I make a B."

Her response showed her vibrant and fiery personality. She is a happy-go-lucky girl who enjoys life and does not take things too seriously. Making friends comes easily to her because she has such an outgoing and bubbly personality. She enjoys dancing and volunteering with elementary-aged children, teaching them about academics, but also life lessons. During her junior year, she competed in a Distinguished Young Women of a Georgia county competition and finished in first place.

Bobbie

Bobbie was a sophomore at a university in the Northeastern United States when she participated in the focus group. She is African American and was born in Georgia. In high school, she considered herself popular and she participated in several school activities. She also competed in pageants and singing competitions. She has a younger sister who attended GPHS at the time of the study. She took AP and honors classes because she thought she was “a good fit” and her “parents strongly advised [her] to take [honors and AP] class[es].” Bobbie graduated from GPHS in 2017 with honors with distinction, maintaining a 3.0 GPA or higher and taking multiple AP courses.

Cathy

Cathy was a junior at GPHS at the time of the study. Cathy is African American, and she stated that her mother is Creole and her father is Cherokee. She moved to Georgia when she was in the sixth grade and began attending a public school. She began attending GPHS in the 11th grade. Previously she attended a public high school in a Georgia county school system. Before moving to Georgia, Cathy lived in Louisiana and attended private school. At GPHS, Cathy claimed that she was able to make friends easily and she participated on the GPHS volleyball team as well as a competitive travel ball team year-round. Although she said she stayed busy

throughout the year competing in volleyball, she claimed that “whenever [she] is in her seasons [she] did better” on her grades because she had to manage her time effectively. Cathy lives with her mother and stepfather. Her mother has a college degree in business. Her father does not have a college degree and he works on the railroad as an engineer. Her stepfather is in the military and is a military cop on an Air Force base. Her parents have high expectations for her academically, and thus Cathy has taken several AP and honors courses in high school. She has taken mostly AP English and social studies classes and she wants to take an AP math class in her senior year. She noted that she is very active in class and works hard to maintain an A average in her classes.

Christy

At the time of the study, Christy was a freshman at a university in the Southern United States. She is African American and was born in Georgia. Christy said that she enjoyed reading, writing, shopping, playing sports, and spending time with her family and friends. As a high-school student, Christy was a member of the basketball and track teams. While she was well-liked by her peers, she commented that she had a very small group of close friends.

Christy is the youngest of three children. Christy’s older sister is also a GPHS graduate and was student at the same university that Christy attended. Christy’s parents are divorced, and she was raised mostly by her single mother. Both of Christy’s parents have college degrees. Her father is a doctor and her mother is a public-school teacher. Christy’s parents placed “education [as a] top priority over everything” and “they [didn’t] accept Bs and Cs.” These expectations pushed Christy to graduate from GPHS in 2018 as an honor student maintaining a 3.0 or higher GPA.

Dawn

At the time of the study, Dawn was a sophomore at a university in the Southern United States. She attended the university on a prestigious nationally recognized academic scholarship. Her interests included fashion, writing, and social issues. She considered herself the “most outspoken one” of her friends. She noted influencing others in positive ways, and to change the world was her true passion. Seeking social justice motivates her in her studies and life goals.

Dawn is a child of immigrants and was born in England. She considers herself an African American Nigerian. Her parents were born in Nigeria and lived in England at the time of Dawn’s birth. Both of Dawn’s parents have college degrees. Her father was a medical doctor in the UK; however, in the United States, he works as an adult and child psychiatrist. Her mother worked as a lawyer in the UK and as a nurse in the United States. Dawn’s mother is currently a doctoral student. Her family moved to the United States when she was 6 months old and they lived mostly in the Southern United States in Tennessee and Georgia. Dawn is the youngest of three children. Her older sister was born with physical and mental limitations and died at an early age. Dawn’s brother is 4 years older than her, and also attended GPHS and the same university as Dawn. He originally received an athletic scholarship but was later diagnosed with a condition that prevents him from playing football.

Dawn began attending GPHS when she was in the ninth grade. Dawn is what I call an overachiever. She goes above and beyond what is required of her and seeks almost perfection in her studies. In high school, Dawn took mostly AP classes in English, social studies, science, and Spanish. She felt that she “learned a lot more in [her AP course assignments] and actually soak[ed] those things up and [took] those assignments to heart.” Additionally, she was on the tennis team for part of high school and she also served as the editor of the GPHS literary

magazine. Dawn graduated from GPHS with honors with distinction, meaning that she took a required number of AP courses along with maintaining a certain GPA.

Jay

At the time of the study, Jay was a sophomore at a university in the Southern United States. He is African American, and he was born in Arkansas. He enjoyed playing sports and he “love[ed] singing at church and now [he] loves singing songs that [he] write[s]”. Jay was very popular in high school and was very involved on campus. He has an outgoing personality and his positive attitude and happy presence make his peers want to be his friend. He played basketball and sang in the choral program. Additionally, he ran for class president his senior year and excelled in public speaking and leadership. He moved to Georgia when he was in 11th grade and began attending GPHS. Jay is an only child. Both of his parents have college degrees.

Karhma

At the time of the study, Karhma was a senior at GPHS. She began attending GPHS when she was in the seventh grade. She is the youngest of two children and her older sister also attended and graduated from GPHS. Karhma was actively involved on campus in several activities including mock trial and literary competition. Karhma is a confident and effective public speaker and recently was awarded best Defense Attorney in an area mock trial competition. She was also the president of the National Honors Society and she represented the senior class as one of six representatives on the homecoming court. She is outspoken and outgoing and has many friends. Academically, she took a variety of honors and AP courses in all core subjects. Karhma “would like to see more Black kids taking AP or honors classes.” She “wants them to think they are capable of it” just like she is. Karhma’s mother is a graduate of

Howard University and works in sales, and her father is a United States military veteran, works on an Air Force base, and builds airplanes.

Kendra

At the time of the study Kendra was a junior at GPHS and had previously attended a public high school for 2 years. She is African American and was born in Georgia. She began attending GPHS in the 11th grade. Kendra enjoyed her new school, but she said her “struggle is just trying to be more social.” Previously, she attended a public high school in a Georgia county school system. Kendra was an extremely hard worker and was taking her first honors or AP class during her junior year. She was very successful in her AP English class, maintaining an A average. She was a member of the tennis team at GPHS. Kendra is the oldest of three children, all of whom attend GPHS. Both of Kendra’s parents have master’s degrees. Her father has an M.B.A. and works a truck driver and her mother has a master’s of teaching with communication and works as a behavioral therapist.

Lee

At the time of the study, Lee was a freshman at a university in the Southern United States. He was attending university on a soccer scholarship. Lee is African American and was born in Georgia. Lee enjoys playing video games and hanging out with his friends. He is a “quiet person [and sometimes] doesn’t talk at all in some classes,” but he is well-liked by his classmates and has many close friends. He is the oldest of two children in his family. Both of Lee’s parents have college degrees. His father has a doctorate in optometry and works as an optometrist; additionally, he has a master of divinity degree and serves a pastor. Lee’s mother had a master’s degree in education and worked as an educator until her untimely death in the summer of 2018. Lee felt that “all of his support was from home” when he was in high school.

Lee began attending GPHS in the 10th grade and his brother is currently in 10th grade at GPHS. Previously, Lee attended a small, private, parochial school and attended elementary school at a Georgia county public school. In high school, he played basketball, soccer and ran track. Lee graduated from GPHS in 2018 as an honor student maintaining a 3.0 or higher GPA.

Robbie

At the time of the study, Robbie was a freshman at a state university in the Southern United States. She is African American and was born in Georgia. Robbie enjoys reading, writing, drawing, and painting. In high school, Robbie had many friends and was well-liked by her peers. However, she claimed that she was not very involved in extracurricular activities. Robbie is an only child. Both of Robbie's parents are doctors. Her father is a neurologist and her mother is an optometrist. Her mother also teaches classes online through the University of Phoenix. Robbie took a combination of regular and AP classes and chose to avoid AP math and science courses. However, she took AP English and social studies courses to challenge herself. When she "got into National Honor Society it made [her] work harder." Although she started out in instructional support classes in elementary school, Robbie graduated from GPHS in 2018 as an honor student maintaining a 3.0 or higher GPA during high school.

Robin

At the time of the study, Robin was a sophomore at a university in the Southern United States. She is African American and was born in Georgia. Robin enjoys reading, volunteering on campus and in the community tutoring students, and she was involved in and concerned with social justice issues. Robin is a confident person and student and is extremely driven. Although she is sometimes shy and reserved, she is not afraid to stand up for what she believes in and have

a voice in the world. She often felt that she “is the spokesperson for [her] race, or [her] party identification or ideology.”

Robin is an only child who has mostly been raised by her single mother. Her mother has a doctorate in education and currently works as an educator. Robin began attending GPHS during her freshman year of high school. She graduated high school a year early because she skipped the fifth grade. Robin “wanted to be challenged” in high school; therefore, she took as many AP and honors classes as possible in subjects in which she felt confident. In the end, it paid off because Robin graduated from GPHS in 2017 with honors with distinction, maintaining a 3.0 GPA or higher while also taking multiple AP and honors courses. While in high school, she was a member of the soccer and track teams.

Results

During data analysis, six overarching major themes emerged. Table 2 shows the major themes and subthemes that emerged during coding and analysis. In all, the six major themes were accompanied by no fewer than two, and not more than six, distinct subthemes. Following the tabular presentation of the themes, a narrative follows to explore each major theme and subtheme. In the narrative, participant quotations and reflections are presented to fully understand the findings of the study.

Table 1

Major Themes and Subthemes

Major theme	Subtheme
Teacher relationships	Teacher support Teacher expectations
Student relationships	AP and honors student relationships Non-honors and AP student relationships Negative racial undertones Underrepresentation in honors and AP
Parental support	Parental advocacy Parents' education background Parental support of AP and honors participation
Academic environment	Competitive environment Rigorous and challenging Critical thinking and analysis
AP and honors application process	Lack of understanding Grade requirements Prerequisites Teacher recommendations Test scores Private vs. public school
Achievement gap	Academic achievement Number of AP offerings

Theme Development**Major Theme 1: Teacher Relationships**

The first major theme that emerged during data analysis addresses each of the research questions for the study because, based on the participant responses, teacher support is an important factor in their experiences in honors and AP courses as well as their decisions to enroll or not enroll in the classes. The students reported that their teachers impacted their experiences in AP and honors in a variety of ways. Teachers were identified as being supportive and having high expectations for their students. For example, Christy said that “all of the teachers of AP classes have a higher expectation of the students in class.”

Teacher support. The first subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 1 regarded the level of support from honors versus regular education teachers. AP and honors teachers were more supportive than were regular education teachers. Teacher support is instrumental to the success of students in AP and honors because of the challenges of the courses and the commitment required by the student to be successful. Dawn said, “The teachers were just, they were wonderful.” The participants repeatedly said that their AP and honors teachers were supportive and that the participants were closer to those teachers than they were to the ones who taught the college prep and Bible classes that they attended. Robin stated, “I feel like the gifted teachers are so much more invested in you and I don’t think that has so much to do with race.” Additionally, Robbie stated, “I know my honors and AP teachers way better than my regular.” Bobbie also stated,

I think that, like, my AP and honors classes, those teachers are the teachers I relate to more and I enjoy what I’m learning in my classes because I can really see their passion for what they are teaching because they really want their students to succeed.

Because the AP and honors teachers interact with the students more and get to know them on a deeper level, the students feel they have their support. Christy felt supported by her AP and honors teachers during her senior year: “I got tons of recommendation letters from different teachers and I think like they are just more available to the students.”

The students also reported that in their AP and honors classes, as opposed to their regular classes, the teachers have more control over the behavior of students during class discussions about controversial or polarizing topics. Robbie said,

I think that in my AP classes when we have, like, these controversial discussions, it’s much more organized like what Christy was talking about with the gun law that we did

have, like, it was, like, you were, like, okay give your opinion, but also listen to the other opinion so it, like, never go into yelling matches. . . . I think that, like, in AP classes . . . it's much more like a better setting for those topics . . . like respectful for the students.

Also, around the time that I conducted the focus group interviews, Donald Trump had been recently elected as president and the students said that there were constant discussions going on in each of their classes about it and the students were often insensitive to those who were not Trump supporters. This directly impacted the participants in this study because all of them stated that they were anti-Trump. Consequently, Dawn reported that "in English classes it was . . . my teachers were really quick to reel a child in, but in other classes, they would kind of like let them continue to go on and on and be rude and disrespectful to me." Because of the teacher intervention in such incidents, the students felt more supported. Also, Robbie said the AP and honors teachers "are more respectable in what they believe, and they can say both sides; they're not biased or at least they don't seem to be or they don't show their bias" with regard to political conversations that take place. Further, Bobbie stated, "I guess, like, with AP teachers they handled it a lot better and they were, like, more respectful in that situation. I felt more comfortable in their classes rather than in the others I had during the day." However, one student noted, "Sometimes it's hard to feel like you have an ally in the teacher; it's a very Caucasian space." The student said she felt supported, but if there was an issue, she sometimes worried whether she could trust the teacher 100%.

On the other hand, students did comment that there were incidents in which they did not feel supported by an AP or honors teacher. All of the incidents reported about a teacher were about the same teacher. Dawn claimed, "He's said things about affirmative action and . . . I'll never forget it." Jay was told, "If you ever decide to attend medical school, you know, with you

being a Black man, you have advantages over a lot of people.” These types of comments from the teacher made the students feel that they were not supported by the teacher. Dawn felt that any time she had an issue with this teacher, that she needed to send a “formal email.” She did not feel comfortable approaching the teacher in person. She stated, “I felt like I couldn’t approach him. . . . He was just very crude and just very open about his political views, if you will, and just kind of him being, like, the bitter White man.” However, these negative incidents were not the standard or norm for the AP and honors teachers that the participants shared about. Additionally, it is important to note that this teacher is no longer working at GPHS.

Overall, the students emphasized that they felt that their AP and honors teachers were there to help them be successful. Jay stated that he often went to his teachers after school for extra help anytime he had a question about his work. Christy said, “It was just easier to come after school for, like, AP class and you could just ask a quick question.” Kendra also felt that she was supported by her teachers: “They are very friendly and helpful; when I need help, they help me.” Cathy also felt that she could go to her AP teacher for help: “I think I can come to her if I do need help on anything that I write.” As a new student at GPHS, Cathy also shared that she felt particularly supported by one of her AP teachers: “My teacher . . . she checks up on me . . . she just asks how my year has been.” Robin stated, “The teachers cared more.” For example, she stated that her AP Euro teacher “would tell us if we see him standing outside of his classroom to come by and talk. He wanted to be there for us for the rest of our lives.” This made her feel like the teacher cared about her as a person. Dawn said, “The AP teachers, they just made sure we were on top of it, and they made sure if we needed help, they were available.” Jay also said that teachers were available after school: “I mean we get a tutor from our actual teacher.” The students feel that although the AP and honors classes are difficult and challenging,

they knew they could be successful because of the availability and commitment to them from their teachers. Teacher support is paramount to success in AP and honors classes and even more so for students of color.

Teacher expectations. The second subtheme that emerged from the first major theme concerned the level of expectation that the AP and honors teachers had for their students. Teachers in AP and honors classes have high expectations for their students. The students described their AP and honors classes as challenging and difficult and on a higher level than their regular classes because of the expectations placed on them by the teachers of those classes. Dawn claimed, “There is just, across the board, there is a very different expectation for AP and regular.” Overall, the participants did not feel as though there was a different expectation for them because they are Black students. Further, the participants felt that their teachers “expect this high caliber of education and performance regardless of how you are or what race you are.” Robin also said, “Maybe I’m blind and naïve . . . I never felt that a teacher . . . I’ve never thought that a teacher looked at me and thought ‘Oh, she’s Black, she’s not going to do as well as the other ones.’” There was a consensus that race was not a factor in the expectations that teachers had of their performance in AP and honors classes.

The teachers of AP and honors classes require a higher level of effort and activity from their students. Lee reported that they are required to “explain stuff, like elaborate on it and dig deep” into their content, and they learn a lot more information at a quicker pace. Dawn also said, “The questions that the AP classes ask is like to get us to strive, to dig deeper and probe more about the world” and “it’s more analytical, faster-paced . . . you’re working towards a goal.” Additionally, one student claimed, the “classroom was definitely more difficult. It was fast-

paced over other classes and the teachers . . . I think all of the teachers of AP classes have a higher expectation of the students in the class.”

The teachers in AP and honors expect the students to give their best effort and to learn the material and concepts quickly, and if they do not, it is the students’ responsibility to get the extra help they need on their own outside of class. According to Cathy, “In AP I don’t want to say they don’t care, but it’s kind of like this evidence in class you better get this and if you can’t get it, you need to get it after class.” The participants said that this was quite different from their college prep classes. They claim that those classes are very easy, and the teachers do not expect much from them. For example, Robbie said the following about one of the college prep teachers,

He gives you the study guide. He tells you the answers to, like, every question, then it’s still open notes and then he’s going to curve the grade. I’m not able, and people still flunk. How? How? On top of all of that, he’s still going to give you an extension so, like, the homework is, like, it might be five questions. He’ll tell you in a week in Advanced or no like he gives you like a month in advance to do your homework and then the day it’s due, he’s, like, “Oh, only half of you did the homework so I’m going to give you until the end of class.” And then the end of class comes, and he goes, “Y’all don’t think I’m serious. Well, I’ll give you until Monday.”

In their AP and honors classes, the students felt that they had to be more accountable to themselves and make sure they followed due dates. “For AP Lang, we have a lot of work, but we’re not told to do it all the time,” stated Amanda. The teachers did not hold their hands and constantly remind them of assignments. They had to do that on their own. As a result, Jay claimed, “They really did help me prepare for college.” Jay further claimed,

In the regular class you have a study guide; in the AP class, you have to explain stuff or, like, elaborate on it and dig deeper and you can't do that based off a study guide and we don't get study guides most of the time.

Amanda felt that students are “expected to know certain things; you shouldn't need extra help” in an AP or honors class.

Major Theme 2: Student Relationships

The second major theme discovered during data analysis addresses Research Subquestions 1 and 5. Participant relationships with other AP and honors students is a huge part of their experiences in the classes as well as a challenge that they must overcome. Overall, the participants reported mostly positive and supportive relationships with other students, but there were also trust issues that emerged when relating to the students in their classes. Each of the students reported feeling awkward or out of place at some point in the “Caucasian spaces” as Dawn referred to her classrooms. However, the consensus among participants was that there were not any major problems with their relationships with students in their AP and honors classes.

AP and honors' students' relationships. The first subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 2 regarded relationships among students. Students in AP and honors classes have more positive relationships with each other than in regular classes. The participants had much more to say about their relationships with other students in their honors and AP classes than what they discussed about the teachers. They reported a variety of experiences, both positive and negative, but overall, they felt that the relationships with students in AP and honors classes were better than those in their regular classes. Lee asserted, “You tend to, you're normally closer to the ones you have a lot of classes with, so that's all the honors kids, so I feel like I was closer to them than

the non-honors kids.” Robbie said, “I feel like teachers and students in my, like, honors classes, it was just more like open discussion . . . we had conversations between teachers and students and even having students have other conversations with students about things in the classroom.” The students shared that being Black and being in honors and AP classes can sometimes be uncomfortable. Christy claimed that student relationships were “pretty good, but sometimes it’s awkward if you’re the only Black person.” Karhma said, “It’s never looked at [as] oh, this is the Black girl who’s in this AP Class and I’m better than her.” Further, Lee said, “I felt pretty accepted. I felt accepted, but you still feel out of place being African American.” Each of the students said that they had friends in their AP and honors classes and that everyone in the class wanted to succeed. Kendra said, “People in my honors classes, we’re all on the same academic level.”

Although all students reported positive relationships with their peers, there were times when it felt that they were on their own. Dawn said,

There was not much collaboration, like, it wasn’t a type of, like, space fostering that at least in my year it was not that way at all . . . it wasn’t the most warm and friendly and I don’t know if it was just because the fact that we’re all high-achieving students . . . but a lot of it was just kind of contentious and that was kind of spilled into how they treated me as well as each other.

Because the students were all competing for the same success, it often caused separation among them. Dawn especially felt that she did not have a strong connection to her classmates. Karhma also said,

and for the other race, it's kind of like split; some of them are like good, we can all take AP classes and some of them are like, but I'm better than you; it's a competition like thing so I don't know why.

Cathy commented that she did not really spend time with the people who are in her honors classes, but she did get along with them. She said, "If I'm the only Black person sitting in a predominantly White class, there's, like, a few stares."

Non-honors and AP student relationships. The second subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 2 regarded the relationships that minority students in AP and honors courses have with minority students who are not in AP and honors courses. Students have positive relationships with other minority students who are not in AP and honors. The participants in this study never commented that they were treated differently by other Black students who did not take AP or honors classes. Robbie said,

I feel like a lot of kids who were, like, the same race as me were not in honors or AP and I just think, like, their attitude towards it was, like, "those are hard, why take that when you can take these classes that are a lot easier," but some of them just were kind of like, this is what I'm strongest in, this is what's going to make my GPA look better for colleges than trying to take more challenging classes and possibly have a lower grade.

Helping other minority students with their schoolwork was a common occurrence for the participants in this study. Karhma said, "Like in English, if they are writing a paper, then I can help you write the paper." Cathy shared that she spends time mostly with other Black girls who are not in honors and AP classes. She kind of laughed, sharing that when her friends found out she was in honors and AP classes they will say things "like 'oh Cathy's smart', you're . . . so they would ask me . . . I've been asked to help a couple of times . . . people have been joking 'oh

can you tutor me in math?”” Additionally, Dawn was adamant that she wanted to be there for other students of color: “I want to be a resource for Black students who are still there and have . . . they can look at me and call me for help.”

Negative racial undertones. The third subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 2 regarded the negative racial undertones that were present in honors and AP courses. Minority students felt that negative racial undertones are present in their classes but are more prevalent in regular classes than in honors and AP courses. According to Dawn,

There were a few Black students in the AP courses, but again I feel like there could be some productive conversations and if they had any prejudices they were kind of sly how they worded it, but they tried to do it subtly if anything whereas in the non-honors classes it was just a whole world of difference.

Dawn also asserted, “We got along with each other despite people’s hidden differences.”

Bobbie’s experience was considerably different from Dawn’s because she attended GPHS from PreK through graduation. She was confronted with statements by students claiming that they did not see her as Black. It was very offensive to her and she felt the underlying racism in the comments. She asserted,

I’ve gone to school with people . . . I’m in the grade with now so all of them have known me for the longest time. I guess because of that they think, and I don’t even understand, but they like to throw me in with the pot with them saying like “you’re one of us” kind of like a “you’re not Black.” I’ve gotten that so many times. “Robin you’re not even Black; you don’t talk Black, you don’t act Black like you’re one of us.”

Also, Dawn, Robbie, and Jay had the following conversation during the focus group interview about how they were sometimes viewed by their peers:

Dawn: “I’m not talking about you; I’m talking about the other Black people.”

Robin: “You’re not like them, what? You don’t talk like them.”

Jay: “This is what I hate most, like, say if I’m in an AP class, what I hate most is a White person telling me ‘You act White.’”

Dawn: “When did education become synonymous with being White?”

They felt like the White students think they are complimenting them, but they are stereotyping other Black people as uneducated and saying that an educated Black person is not really Black. This is the epitome of the negative racial undertones the study participants have experienced in their AP and honors classes. Karhma felt racial stereotypes placed on her by students in her AP government class when discussing political issues. She stated that she was assumed to be a Democrat only because she is Black:

They’re putting me in a box, basically saying that I am democratic because I’m Black and they are saying, “Of course you would think that way, because you’re democratic and you’re Black,” but it doesn’t have anything to do with that; it’s just what I believe in.

Karhma just wanted to be seen as a person with certain beliefs, not just a Democrat because she also happens to be Black.

Underrepresentation in honors and AP. The fourth subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 2 regarded the representation of minority students in AP and honors courses. There are not many minority students in the AP and honors classes. As a result, the students automatically felt somewhat out of place just because they were Black. According to Lee,

You’re one of the only African Americans there already and when you’re in the honors classes, I mean it makes it even kind of worse in a sense not worse, but you’re the only African American or there’s only one other . . . like if there’s a race question or anything

like that, everybody will like turn to you to see your opinion, which is like it makes you feel uncomfortable.

Multiple times the students shared about incidents where they felt like they were put on the spot to be the “spokesperson for their entire race.” This was common in classes where there were no other Black students. Dawn, Robin, and Robbie said this happened a lot to them through the years because there were only four Black kids in their entire grade until their junior year when Jay and another non-honors Black student transferred to GPHS. Christy said,

I think when you’re in, like, classes and you’re the only Black person, it’s really awkward because like when you start talking about slavery and racism, the White students look at you and they’re, like, asking questions and, like, I wasn’t a slave, but understand that not all Black people were slaves, but it’s, it’s really awkward sometimes because you’ll hear people, like, make comments they’ll say something then they’ll, like, throw your name in there and you know it’s about slavery and they’re like, “Ok, it’s not funny,” but you got your little stick in.

The students expressed annoyance more than anything with these types of incidents. The participants also shared feelings about why there were not more Black kids in AP and honors classes. Dawn said,

I don’t know if we are talking about why Black people aren’t in AP. That’s important, but a lot of it is you just always feel like you have to work twice as hard in class to prove yourself; you’re on an island, you don’t have Black teachers, you don’t have Black history month, and you don’t want to be the spokesperson for Black people.

Amanda said that “some teachers just push you away . . . somebody needs to be there to push you in the right direction.” Karhma feels that AP and honors classes take a lot of time and some

students just do not have time to commit to them because they are involved in so many other things at school, and they do not want to take all AP classes. She said,

I feel strong that that's why a lot of Black students don't take AP classes because they are hard that's just a given with AP classes and a lot . . . they are time consuming too and I feel like a lot of people try to say, "Well, they are just being lazy." I feel like that's sometimes a little bit of an excuse to say, "Oh, this is why they don't take it because they're lazy." All Black people aren't lazy.

In the end, the participants just want to feel like they belong in the classes, that they have support from their classmates, and that they are the same; they just have a different color of skin and sometimes that means they have a different experience from the others in the class: not a better or worse experience, but just a different one.

Major Theme 3: Parental Support

Major Theme 3 addressed Research Subquestions 2 and 3. Parental support and guidance are paramount to the success of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. The participants believed that the work ethic and desire to achieve at a high level was instilled in them from an early age by their parents. They attributed their accomplishments to the guidance they received at home.

Parental advocacy. The first subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 3 regarded the parental advocacy in the education of the participants. The students' parents were supportive and the biggest advocates in the participants' education. Robbie asserted that the only reason she was even in AP and honors courses is that her parents fought for her to be there. She realized that every child does not have this same support system, and said her parents are "kind of hands-on when it comes to education, like, it's more of, like, this is a privilege, not everyone gets to do

this, so it's not something to be played with." Robbie realized that she was able to have what she has because of her parents and what they have instilled in her. Multiple participants said that part of their motivation in school was to make their parents proud. Kendra commented, "I like to tell my parents about my grades because I like the feeling of them being proud of me." Robin also credited her mom for encouraging her to do her best in her classes: "I, like, push myself even harder than she wants me to push myself, but as far as, like, her physical, coming to the school involvement, there's been lots of it through the years."

The participants repeatedly said that if there was an issue with a grade or an inappropriate teacher comment, their parents were quick to schedule a conference with school administrators to discuss and work through the problem. For example, Jay shared a story about running for class president his senior year. Jay's last name was printed incorrectly on the ballot. Instead of his name, the name was of another Black student who had graduated 3 years prior. Jay was very upset because none of the other names were incorrect. He said that his parents came up to the school to advocate for him in this situation. Dawn also commented, "I don't feel like . . . I wouldn't be as strong as I am now because they were always up in the school's face." The students gave all the credit to their parents as the ones who were on their side and being there for them when they needed the extra push, or when they needed someone to take up for them and be their voice.

The participants stated that other Black students may not have the same support system as they do, and it could account for why many of them do not enroll in AP and honors courses. Kendra said, "I was happy that my parents are involved as compared to my other friends that didn't really get that support system." Dawn also mentioned, "the values they instilled in me, I wouldn't have those . . . I'm thankful, but I don't know if a lot of other students have that."

All of the participants said that their parents had high expectations for them and that they mostly expected them to make A's in all of their classes. For example, Kendra said, "They are very involved, like if you come home with a B they'll be, like, 'Kendra, I know you can do better than that.'" Robin even said that she felt her mom gave her a complex about having to be perfect in her classes: "My mom . . . she's, like, given me problems, I think, because I can have, like, a 99 in a class and I'm still stressing for that one point. . . . I'm, like, sitting there and I'm, like, ok, I need to get extra credit." However, she is glad that her mom has pushed her to be the best that she can be. Jay said his parents allow B's if they know that is the best he can do in a certain class. Overall, the participants felt that their parents want what is best for them. Robbie said, "They want me to be the best I can."

Parents' education background. The second subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 3 regarded the educational background of participants' parents. All of the participants noted that at least one of their parents has a college degree, and nine of the 11 students have at least one parent with a doctorate. There are nine medical doctors—Robbie stated that both of her parents are MDs—and Robin's mother has a doctorate in early childhood education. Additionally, most of the other participants' parents have master's degrees. As a result, none of the study participants are or will be first-generation college students in their prospective families.

Parental support of AP and honors participation. The third subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 3 regarded the parents' support for getting their child into an honors or AP course. The participants noted that their parents fight for their opportunity to participate in AP and honors courses. Several of the participants claimed the reason they were in AP or honors courses was that their parents put them in the classes. They shared stories of one of their parents having to come to the school and make sure they were enrolled in the AP or honors course.

Robbie said, “I think like there have been times when I, like, wouldn’t even be in AP, I wouldn’t have all A’s right now if it wasn’t for the fact that they came up here.” She felt that her mother’s advocacy for her as a gifted student was the only reason that she was able to be in AP and honors courses. Lee said that when he transferred to GPHS, he had to have his parents put him into his honors and AP classes: “My parents have always been really involved and I felt . . . high expectations and of course they are going to fight for me.” Robin also reported that her mother was the one who stepped up and spoke to her headmaster to request to allow her to skip the fifth grade. Additionally, Christy said, “My parents, like Robbie, have had to come up here every . . . like, every year because the principal, he placed me into a lower science class or something, and they are like, no she needs to be in honors or AP.” The participants felt that having their parents advocating for them helped them to achieve at a higher level than they would have without their parents’ encouragement.

Major Theme 4: Academic Environment

The fourth major theme addressed Research Subquestions 1 and 5. The participants described the academic environment as fulfilling yet challenging. They wanted to be in the classes because they wanted to be a part of an environment that fostered academic growth and prepared them for college. They felt they needed these classes in order to get into the colleges they wanted to attend and not be limited to where they can go. They understood the importance of taking many AP classes, doing well in the classes, and passing AP and college entrance exams. They felt that the environment in the AP and honors classes fostered these goals.

Competitive environment. The first subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 4 regarded the competitive environment that exists in AP and honors classes. Participants commented that the AP and honors classes are competitive environments. AP and honors classes

are intense, and the students compete to be at the top of their class. The participants commented multiple times about the high level of competition in AP and honors classes. Robbie said, “It’s so competitive.” Dawn said, “It was competitive; it was fast-paced.” Karhma also agreed:

When you get a test back and you have people looking at your grades, “Oh, you made higher than me,” as if, one, we are in competition to begin with, to see who got the highest grade, but it also doesn’t help, like I said earlier, that I’m the only Black student in my, well now, in all of my AP classes . . . because they aren’t saying it to the White people in class. They’re not saying, “Oh what did you get?”

Jay shared that being at a mostly White private school is so different from his previous diverse public school in Arkansas with regard to the competitiveness of the school:

I think that is really different for me because at my old school, compared to everybody else, I was always, like, the smartest person in all my classes and all of that and when they needed some help and all of that and I was, like, third in my class and, like, I was on track to be valedictorian and all of that and then I come here, I had a 3.95 and then I go from being ranked three to not being in the top 20%.

The participants said that everybody has all A’s so just having all A’s is not enough to show that you are the best. Students also need to take AP courses so that they can get a GPA that is higher than a 4.0. Consequently, the participants said that at GPHS they have an honors with distinction seal for their diplomas that separates them from just having all A’s in regular classes. They are awarded honors with distinction at graduation if they have a certain GPA and they also took a certain number of AP courses. Most of the honors and AP students are striving to earn that honor and hear it announced with their name on the graduation stage. Jay also emphasized,

I definitely wanted the best for myself, wanted to prepare for college the best way I could, put myself in the best position and I always saw myself as the top. I do whatever the highest thing, and I knew I was going to graduate with honors.

Rigorous and challenging. The second subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 4 regarded the rigorous and challenging environment that exists in AP and honors courses. According to the participants, AP and honors courses are rigorous and challenging. The level of rigor is substantial in the AP and honors classes and the participants claimed that it is “double the work.” Assignments are harder and require a high level of effort and thinking. Dawn said, “The questions on the exams were more analytical; it wasn’t super straight forward. . . . It was very much like what does this mean?” According to Karhma, “The difference between an AP and honors class and like I was saying, just the workload. You’ll have a lot of work to do inside the class, maybe not outside the class.”

Critical thinking and analysis. The third subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 4 regarded the critical thinking and analysis that is required for assignments. The students claimed that the assignments require deep levels of critical thinking and analysis. The AP and honors teachers have created a positive academic environment where students can learn what they are passionate about. They accomplish this by the way teachers encourage critical and analytical thinking skills. Christy asserted, “They are not just surface level...they grade like a little deeper but like in AP classes if you get the surface and you get deeper and you just keep going . . . conceptual and critical thinking at a different level.” Additionally, Karhma commented, “It’s going to challenge you to think on deeper levels; to write papers in a deeper way. Analyzing things, not just writing a summary. It does challenge you to deep thinking, which is good.”

Participating in class discussions was mentioned by the students several times as an activity that they felt was challenging them to consider different points of view. Dawn stated, “I felt like, especially like in AP gov’t, I felt like I was actually learning—potentially having productive conversation, but I’d say the other non-honors classes were hostile.” The participants say that part of what makes the AP and honors classes enjoyable are the discussion seminars and other interactive assignments that they get to be a part of in their AP and honors classes. Robbie said, “I feel like teachers and students in my like honors classes, it was just more like open discussion . . . we had conversations between teachers and students and even having students have other conversations with students about things in the classroom.” The students wanted to be in the AP and honors classes, so they would be prepared for college with classes that are considered to be on a college level and do the types of activities and assignments they expect to do in college. Kendra stated, “I think that the AP courses really prepare you for college and it gives you a lot of work and gets you on the track to prepare you for college.”

Major Theme 5: AP Application Process

The fifth major theme to emerge during analysis addressed Research Subquestions 2, 3, and 4. Based on participants’ answers to the interview questions related to the AP and honors course application process, the students could not definitively explain the application process. They gave a variety of responses on what they thought the process was and the steps they would take to get into an AP or honors class if they wanted to do so. The variety in statements included asking a teacher, getting their parents to go up to the school, filling out a form, passing an entrance exam, or being tested at a certain grade level.

Lack of understanding. The first subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 5 regarded the participants’ understanding of the honors and AP application process. Based on their

responses, participants did not have a clear understanding of the AP and honors application process at their school. When directly asked what the process was for getting into honors and AP classes, the students gave varied responses. The students who began attending GPHS said that they took an entrance exam before attending classes at GPHS and that the score from the exam was used to either place them or not place them in the honors or AP course. For example, Jay said that his test scores on the entrance exam showed that he should take AP classes, so he did. However, Lee said that he was placed in regular classes and then his parents had to contact the school and get him changed into the AP or honors classes that he wanted to take. Other participants said that they would be given a form from the teacher to fill out or that they had to have a certain grade in a prerequisite class. Robbie explained,

I think that it's different for Algebra and for math and sciences than for like English and history. I think for English and history it's a matter of being, like, I mean you don't have to be an amazing English or history student to get into those classes, you just have to put in the time and the teacher just sees you're trying that like a B student, but for like math and science, it's much more rigid to get into because they, like, start placement, it's like literally your seventh grade year of middle school, so I think that in those classes, it depends on not only how you were as an eighth grade student, but, like, if you're in, like, a higher placed math or science your junior or senior year, it goes all the way back to how you did in seventh grade math.

The participants were mostly just unsure of the process or steps to take to get into an AP or honors class, but they were somewhat aware of proper steps. For example, Jay said, "I believe anyone trying to go to a good school, most professors would, like, you know, say 'Hey, you should take this.'"

Grade requirements. The second subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 5 regarded the specific grade requirements for acceptance into honors and AP courses. Depending on the subject area, certain grades are required for some AP courses. As previously mentioned by Robbie, the requirement for acceptance into AP courses at GPHS is different, depending on the subject. For English classes, students are encouraged to have an A average in the regular class. In history, they must have at least a 92 or higher to get into the first AP history class their sophomore year. Jay said, “I remember trying to get into AP Stats, you had to have a certain grade in your math test before to be able to do that. That’s pretty much what I did to take the class.”

Prerequisites. The third subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 5 regarded the prerequisites required for some AP and honors courses. The participants noted that math and science APs require prerequisites. The participants said that for science classes, it is mostly determined by their prerequisite courses. Robin explained that as a result, when she came to GPHS in ninth grade, she was placed in regular math and science classes and she had to go to the principal to get switched:

I had to, like, actually go to Mr. [Principal] and take the textbook to him and be like, I knew this stuff, but it was just, it’s somehow different in my high school, so I remember having to go to Mrs. [Department head of science] and other teachers and ask if I could be placed in honors class and then they let me in.

Dawn explained the prerequisite process in science courses: “With AP chemistry, it’s kind of a natural progression of things. Your first year, you take honors biology; second year, you go to honors chemistry . . . AP biology and AP chemistry.” Some students decide not to take the AP

courses after the honors sciences and then some will choose to take AP physics, but that is usually only a few students who take AP physics.

Teacher recommendations. The fourth subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 5 relates to teacher recommendations for AP and honors courses. The participants shared that teacher recommendations are required for some AP classes. The students commented that they are required to have teacher recommendations for the AP courses; however, they also gave evidence that their parent(s) could go to the school and have them put in the classes. Lee, Christy, and Robbie all stated that at least one time during their time at GPHS they had a parent go to the school and put them into an AP course without a recommendation. Karhma said, “Our school could do better in reaching out to the Black kids and asking them if they wanted to take these AP classes.” Dawn shared that when she first came to GPHS she was not put in all honors classes:

When I first came to GPHS, they put me in all honors except honors world history and I was in regular world history and it was far too easy and, um, I made a 100 on the first test and I was told to move up to honors after that.

Teachers initially have the most say in recommending the students for AP and honors courses. However, as noted, students can still get into an AP or honors class with a little extra pressure from their parents.

Test scores. The fifth subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 5 showed that test scores are often required for entrance into honors and AP courses. Participants shared that they were placed in AP courses based on their entrance exams or from an exam they took in sixth grade that determined what math track they would follow. Jay said,

With it being such a challenging curriculum that not everybody is able to handle it so when I got into the school, I took the test and they told me I was able to come, they recommended you should take that; after that, I was in those AP courses.

Private versus public school. The sixth subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 5 related to the differences in the AP and honors application process between public and private schools. The AP and honors application processes are different in public and private schools, according to participants who attended both types of schools. Kendra and Cathy both attended public high schools up until 11th grade and they both said that in order to get into AP or honors they had to take a test in middle school that would allow them into the class. Cathy said that she passed the test and was put into the honors and AP classes. However, Kendra said, “Starting in third grade, you take it every year, but I never passed it. I just passed the creative part, and I didn’t really like how they based how you get into a class off a test.” However, when Kendra began attending GPHS she was asked if she wanted to take AP language and she chose to do so.

Major Theme 6: Achievement Gap

The final major theme revealed during analysis addressed all five research questions. Although the students were not explicitly asked about the achievement gap between White students and students of color, they naturally made connections and offered insight into the phenomenon.

Academic achievement. The first subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 6 regarded the academic achievement of students at private schools versus academic achievement at public schools. Several participants claimed that academic achievement at public schools is lower than at private schools. As mentioned earlier, Jay stated that at his diverse public school in Arkansas he was “third in his class” and at GPHS, he “is not even in the top 20%.” This is evidence that

there is a discrepancy in achievement between the students at the two schools. Jay also pointed out that there were not as many AP classes offered at the public school, demonstrating the fact that the students in these two schools do not have equal access to a quality education. Jay said:

I don't think for African American students . . . I don't think they stress the importance of scores a lot because no matter how good your grades are, if you have horrible test scores, it can really hurt you in those admissions. White kids . . . their parents pay thousands upon thousands of dollars for tutors and, like, say a lot of Black kids, um . . . they're not going to pay for a class on this or that.

They feel like the Black students at other schools do not have access to quality educators and, therefore, they do not get a high level of education. Furthermore, Christy commented, "most Black schools don't have the teachers, the education, so, like, they're not as smart."

Number of AP offerings. The second subtheme that emerged from Major Theme 6 regarded the number of AP courses offered at private and public schools. Participants who attended both types of schools claimed that less AP and honors are offered at public school than at private school. Several participants in this study had previously been enrolled in public schools before enrolling in GPHS and commented that there were not as many AP courses offered at their previous schools. For example, GPHS offers AP Spanish as well as a few AP courses in 10th grade and at least one AP course in every core subject for Grades 11 and 12. The participants noted that in their previous public schools, which were attended mostly by Black students or a larger minority population, did not offer even close to the number of APs as those offered at GPHS.

Research Question Responses

Central Research Question

The central question of the study was, “What are the lived experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?” The central question was addressed throughout the interview process and expressed in the major themes—teacher relationships, student relationships, parental support, academic environment, AP and honors application process, and achievement gap—that originated in the participants’ responses. Different experiences of the participants were shared, especially between the female and male participants; however, the participants agreed that their AP and honors courses were challenging and rigorous and the “teachers expected more from them.” Dawn stated, “I, we, just had varied experiences.” Further they reported both positive and negative relationships with the White students in their classes, but mostly positive relationships with their teachers. For example, Christy commented that some students were “surprised that she is Black and doing well” in her AP classes. Overall, the participants agreed that their relationships with both teachers and students in honors and AP courses were stronger and more positive than their relationships with teachers and students in their college prep and regular classes such as Bible. Kendra stated that her teachers were “very friendly and helpful.”

Research Subquestions

SQ1. The first subquestion was, “How do high-achieving Hispanic and Black students describe their experiences in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in a Georgia private high school?” The major themes—teacher relationships, student relationships, academic environment, and achievement gap—were all addressed in SQ1. Overall, the participants responded that they had mostly positive experiences in the AP and honors courses with their

relationships with the teachers of the classes. The participants reported they felt that their honors and AP teachers were supportive of them and wanted them to succeed. The participants felt most comfortable in their English classes with how the teachers kept an open and inclusive classroom by being “very accommodating on various viewpoints and pushing for other students in class to think outside the box.” The participants felt that there was more “open discussion” in AP and honors and it was fostered and encouraged by their teachers.

However, several participants reported negative incidents that occurred with a teacher in which the students felt they were treated differently from other students because of race. For example, one student was accused of cheating on a test and the teacher stated, “This is a hard test and normally people don’t do well.” The student said, “As a Black student . . . as a female Black student, how am I supposed to feel when a teacher says this?” Another student felt that at least one of her male AP teachers talked in a “very demeaning way” to her because of her different political beliefs, as opposed to the way he responded to a White male student. Finally, one of the students said that a teacher commented, “If you ever decide to attend medical school, you know, with you being a Black man, you have advantages over a lot of people.” While the teachers may not have meant their comments to be negatively and racially motivated, the problem is that the students took these statements in a negative way. Even with these incidents, overall, the students felt that their AP teachers were much more invested in their success and preparation for their futures than were their regular education teachers.

On the other hand, many of the students reported issues or roadblocks in their relationships with students in those classes. For example, Karhma felt that she was often singled out and asked about her grades on major assessments and would sometimes get surprised responses if she performed better than one of the White students inquiring about her grade. She

stated that the girls in her class were overly competitive and Karhma could not understand why because “they all couldn’t win.” Additionally, Dawn suggested that AP classes were “competitive [and] fast-paced . . . there wasn’t much collaboration” in those environments. She felt that it was difficult to navigate those “Caucasian spaces.”

SQ2. The second subquestion was, “What factors impact the success of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?” Teacher relationships, parental support, the AP and honors application process, and the achievement gap were addressed in SQ2. Every student in this study responded that their parents were their number-one support system and their parents expected them to make A’s in their classes. Therefore, it is not surprising that nine out of the 11 participants have at least one parent with a doctorate. One student said that her parents “do not accept B’s and C’s.” Education is a priority and achieving success and going to a good school are not negotiable in their families; it is a requirement. Further, Dawn emphatically stated, “[I] feel like I owe it to them to do the best I can since they’ve done so much for me.” Jay commented that his parents “would help [him] study [and] would stay up with him studying” late at night. Multiple students reported that their parents had come to school and spoken to school officials on their behalf with regard to grades, placement in honors or AP classes, or for just general communication and support with school officials.

SQ3. The third subquestion was, “What factors impact a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student’s decision to enroll in an honors or Advanced Placement (AP) course?” SQ3 was addressed in the major themes of teacher relationships, parental support, the AP and honors application process, and the achievement gap. Most of the participants responded that their parents had a major impact on their decision to enroll in honors and AP courses. Additionally,

students said that middle school teachers were the first to recommend them for honors or AP classes and some students who had come from a public school in middle school or who had transferred to GPHS in high school reported taking a standardized test and achieving a certain score on that test which put them in AP and honors. Kendra reported that she “had to be in honors in eighth grade” to get into honors in high school. Therefore, when she came to GPHS and was asked if she wanted to take 11th grade AP language, she took advantage of the opportunity and enrolled in the class. Finally, students reported taking an entrance exam at GPHS that was used to place them in the AP or honors class. Several students reported being placed in a regular class—known as college prep at GPHS—and then making the request themselves by speaking to the teacher of the course or the department head of the content area, to be switched to an AP or honors class. After proving themselves capable with high scores on tests for the class, the students were granted permission to enroll in AP or honors.

SQ4. The fourth subquestion was, “What factors impact a high-achieving Hispanic or Black student’s decision not to enroll in an honors or Advanced Placement course?” Teacher relationships, the AP and honors application process, and the achievement gap are major themes addressed in SQ4. All participants were enrolled or were previously enrolled in at least one AP or honors course. However, most of them chose at some point to not take AP or honors courses in various subjects. The most common reason for not taking an AP or honors class was that the student was not strong in that subject even though they could take it and do okay. Several students felt that they did not want to risk doing damage to their GPAs by taking a class that was not their strongest subject and multiple students said they “did not want too much stress on” themselves with too many APs. One student commented that there “was too much on the line” and it was not worth the risk of possibly not getting into the college of their choice. Finally, one

student chose to only take one AP in her first year at GPHS because she was new to the school and felt that she wanted to see what the APs were like at GPHS before adding more than she could handle.

SQ5. The fifth subquestion was, “What challenges do high-achieving Hispanic and Black students face in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses? The major themes of teacher relationships, student relationships, academic environment, and the achievement gap were all addressed in SQ5. Overall, the participants reported that it is challenging to look around the classroom and be the only Black student. Additionally, Dawn noted, “We don’t have Black teachers and sometimes you don’t know where you stand with your White teachers and so sometimes when they do things that may not actually be shady, sometimes I’m hypersensitive.” Also, several participants reported that any time race was brought up, they felt uncomfortable because of an odd stare or being asked to be the spokesperson for their entire race by a teacher. Lee reported that in AP and honors classes he “just automatically felt out of place; it’s just a given.” This was a common response from the students with regard to how accepted they felt in their honors and AP courses.

Summary

Study participants reported mostly positive experiences with AP and honors teachers and some negative experiences with students in AP and honors classes. They felt supported and encouraged by their teachers; however, they felt out of place at times with their classmates, although they all felt that they were closer to their classmates in their AP and honors courses than they were with their classmates in their college prep courses. While the students in this study were high-achieving, several of them commented that during junior or senior year of high school they chose not to take an AP class. For example, Dawn was recommended for a senior

AP math class, but she chose not to take the class. Worrying that earning a grade below an A in an AP or honors course would lower their GPA, increase their stress, or lose their interest, some students chose to avoid some AP or honors courses. These participants reported repeatedly that their support system for success came from home and they were expected by their parents to perform at the highest level possible. Finally, the students felt that the biggest challenge in their AP and honors courses was sometimes not feeling fully accepted or expected to be in an AP or honors course by their classmates. Having an AP or honors teacher who supported them was instrumental in providing students the needed encouragement to overcome these issues.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand high-achieving Hispanic and Black high school students' experiences in honors and AP courses in a Georgia private high school, GPHS. I collected and analyzed data to tell the story of 11 high school students' experiences developed through six major themes that emerged during data analysis. The data were collected through focus group interviews, individual participant interviews, and participant journals. I followed the plan outlined in Chapter Three to analyze the data collected through the three methods. In Chapter Four, I provided a detailed analysis of the data collected, along with direct quotes from a focus group, the participant interviews, and participant journal responses. Chapter Five consists of six sections: (a) an overview of the chapter, (b) a summary of the findings, (c) a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, (d) an implications section that provides both practical and methodological implications, (e) an outline of the study and delimitations and limitations, and (f) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This study was conducted in a private high school in Georgia. Participants included 11 Hispanic and/or Black high school students. Of the participants, 10 were Black and one of the participants was Black and Puerto Rican; nine were female and two were male. All participants had taken at least one AP or honors course and had an overall minimum GPA of 3.0 at the time of the study. The participants' experiences were collected through a focus group interview, participant interviews, and participant journals; six major themes became evident and are shared in this chapter. The major themes were identified as teacher relationships, student relationships,

parental support, academic environment, AP and honors application process, and achievement gap.

The study was guided by one central research question and five additional research subquestions. The central question asked about the lived experiences of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students while taking honors and AP courses. While the experiences of the participants varied, overall, they reported positive relationships with their teachers. Further, their classroom experiences were positive, rigorous, and competitive. Although they felt negative racial undertones present in the views of their White classmates, they did not report negative treatment from classmates in their day-to-day classroom experience. Each of the research subquestions and, consequently, each of the six themes were connected to the central research question because each theme related to the experiences of the participants in their AP and honors courses.

The first research subquestion addressed how high-achieving Hispanic and Black students described their experiences in honors and AP courses at GPHS. Teacher relationships, student relationships, academic environment, and achievement gap were the major themes that developed related to SQ1. All participants claimed to have mostly positive experiences in their AP and honors classes. They noted strong teacher support and expectations that guided their success in those classes. Further, the participants felt that student relationships in honors and AP courses were mostly positive and stronger, yet more competitive than their relationships with students in their regular education courses. However, they reported that negative racial undertones existed between them and the White students who were also in their classes. The academic environment impacted students by preparing them for the rigorous challenges that they would face in college by focusing on critical thinking and higher-order reasoning skills in class

discussions and in-depth writing assignments. Finally, participants pointed out that the achievement gap between White students and students of color was significant and overreaching in both private and public schools.

The second research subquestion addressed factors that impact the success of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. SQ2 connects to the themes of teacher relationships, parental support, the AP and honors application process, and the achievement gap. Teacher relationships are an integral part of the success of students. The participants felt supported and connected to their teachers, who consistently provide them with the needed tools for achievement. However, the parental support was agreed upon by the participants as most influential in preparing them to be successful in AP classes, with parental support starting at an early age in their education and continuing throughout it. Additionally, participants noted that the AP and honors application process was important to their success simply by allowing them to take part in these types of classes. Lastly, the achievement gap was a pervasive theme that related to this question. Participants who had attended public school before attending GPHS noted that there was an achievement disparity that impacted their desire for success in their AP classes.

The third research subquestion addressed the factors that impacted the decision of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students to enroll in honors and AP courses. SQ3 connects to the themes of teacher support, parental support, the AP and honors application process, and the achievement gap. Participants noted that teachers, test scores, and prerequisite factors all served to influence their decision to enroll in honors or AP courses. Additionally, they commented that their parents often fought for their right to enter honors and AP courses when they did not meet the previously mentioned requirements for participation in the classes. Participants also noted

that the application process was different based on the class and was also different in private schools versus public schools that they had attended. Further, they mentioned that in public schools they had attended, there were not as many AP courses as were offered in private schools they attended.

The fourth research subquestion addressed the factors that impacted the decision of high-achieving Hispanic or Black student's decision not to enroll in an honors or AP course. Teacher relationships, the AP and honors application process, and the achievement gap were all themes related to SQ4. Participants reported that extra stress or lack of ability were factors that impacted their decision not to enroll in an honors or AP course. Participants reported that they sometimes chose not to enroll in too many AP courses because they thought it would be too stressful on them. Further, they reported that for subjects in which they were not as strong, they were reluctant to enroll in the class because they did not want to take a chance of harming their GPA, which would decrease their opportunity to enroll in the college of their choice.

The last research subquestion addressed the challenges faced in honors and AP courses by high achieving Hispanic and Black students. The themes for SQ5 included teacher relationships, student relationships, academic environment, and the achievement gap. The biggest challenges faced by the participants in this study were the lack of other students of color in their classes and the lack of teachers of color. They often reported automatically feeling out of place because of their race. Next, challenging curriculum and the sheer number of AP and honors courses taken by the students were also noted as challenges for the participants in their AP and honors classes. Finally, the achievement gap between students of color and White students was evident to the participants even though it was not specifically addressed in the study.

Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that there is a need for more participation in honors and AP courses for students of color. Although, there is not a clear understanding of why there is such a large discrepancy between enrollment of White students in AP and honors and enrollment of Hispanic and Black students in AP and honors, common characteristics of the study participants became evident. Having at least one parent who was a college graduate appeared to increase the chances of a student being in honors and AP because every study participant met this criterion. Beyond that, all participants in this study were highly motivated and held accountable by their parents. They were encouraged and supported by their parents from an early age and this instilled in them a drive to succeed.

Empirical Literature

The identification of gifted students relies too heavily on test scores and, as a result, it causes a disproportionate number of White students, as opposed to minority students, to be identified as gifted and placed into honors and AP courses (Van Tassel-Baska et al., 2007). While test scores were mentioned as one way to identify students for honors and AP courses by the study participants, only three out of the 11 participants reported that a failed test score was used to keep them out of honors or AP courses. Cathy claimed, “In middle school, I was recommended to take the honors test and, as an eighth grader, I was recommended to take it for ninth grade and then when I took physical science, my physical science teacher recommended me to chemistry.” Parental and teacher recommendations were also used to identify students for honors and AP courses. Therefore, the study findings support those of Davis et al. (2013) and

Thomas (2008) by confirming that students were identified for AP and honors courses through several methods including test scores, class performance, teacher recommendations, and parent recommendations.

Previous research suggested that one reason high-achieving Black students did not want to take honors and AP courses was because they felt that they would be seen negatively by their same-race peers (Henfield et al., 2010; Lovett, 2011; Rubin, 2003; Saunders & Maloney, 2005). These earlier studies indicated that Black students feel out of place when they look around the room and do not see many students who are of their same race sitting in the classroom, and the present study findings both confirm and refute these claims. In this study, participants said that they automatically felt out of place being Black in an honors or AP class with mostly White kids, but that did not stop them from wanting to be in the class. Also, the participants stated that they were not treated differently by their peers of their same race who are not in AP and honors classes. If anything, their peers were happy that they are in AP and honors courses and often ask them for help in completing difficult work in their classes. For example, Robbie said,

I feel like a lot of kids who were like the same race as me were not in honors or AP and I just think like their attitude towards it was like “Those are hard, why take that when you can take these classes that are a lot easier,” but some of them just were kind of like, “This is what I’m strongest in, this is what’s going to make my GPA look better for colleges than trying to take more challenging classes and possibly have a lower grade.”

Therefore, the mindset of some minority students who are not in AP and honors classes shows that there are many factors that influence them to avoid the classes.

Participants came from families in which at least one parent had a college degree.

Therefore, the study findings suggest that minority students who come from homes with at least

one parent with a college degree are more likely to enroll in AP and honors courses. This confirms the findings of multiple research studies (Alexander, 2002; Braid, 2009; Ford & Whiting, 2001; Stewart, 2008; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2007; Verdugo, 2011). Student participants claimed that their parents were their biggest supporters for their academic endeavors. Karhma emphasized, “Oh, my parents are very involved in my education. They want me to excel.” Having the added luxury of a successful parent’s encouragement benefited these students.

Finally, taking AP and honors courses increases the chances of college acceptance into elite schools and success in college by allowing students to earn GPAs that are higher than 4.0. (Ndura et al., 2003). Multiple participants claimed that their AP courses prepared them for college and helped them get into the schools of their choice. Dawn commented, “I knew I had to pick up the pace if I wanted to get into certain schools, so I took five APs.” Further, the study participants who were already enrolled in college were attending noteworthy colleges and were successful.

Van den Bergh et al. (2010) reported that, often, minority students do not feel supported by their teachers. While there was one teacher mentioned in the present study who some participants did not connect with, overall, the students reported over and over that their teachers were not only supportive, but that their best teacher-student relationships were with their AP and honors teachers. Christy noted, “Most of the teachers were good so I didn’t, like, have any bad experiences.” Therefore, Van den Bergh et al.’s research is not supported in the present study. Further, Pringle et al. (2013) reported that minority students felt that they were purposely left out of honors and AP courses and that minority students were not supported by teachers of those classes. However, the present study findings also refute this research because many participants

in the present study said their teachers were often the ones who recommended them for their honors and AP courses.

Theoretical Literature

CRT, first developed by Derrick Bell in the 1970s (Delgado and Stefanic, 2002) provided a theoretical lens through which to view the present study. It was rooted in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that served to desegregate schools. Because school officials failed to desegregate and create an equal educational environment for all White and Black students, Bell's theoretical approach came to fruition (Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Taylor, 2006). The present study supports Bell's theory because Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented in AP and honors classes. Also, when they do participate in the classes, they are less successful in passing AP exams than their White counterparts. The participants in this study made up less than 10% of the population of AP and honors classes at GPHS. Dawn said, "There were a few Black students in the AP courses." Therefore, this suggests that minority students, specifically Black and Hispanic students, do not have the same access to honors and AP courses as their White counterparts. This also suggests that even though whole-school segregation has been illegal since the 1970s, within school segregation still exists, because very few Hispanic and Black students participate in AP and honors courses. One student commented that she felt that she had to work twice as hard as other students to get credit in classes.

Further, Bell's theory suggests that those in power—in this case, White teachers and school personnel—exert their power over the minority population in schools and restrict their access to a quality and AP education. One reason this happens is because of the innate and proven bias of standardized tests (Brayboy et al., 2007). Standardized tests have been proven to be historically, culturally, and racially biased. This impacts minority students' ability to perform

as well on the tests as White students. It does not mean that they are not capable of performing at a high level in an AP or honors course. Teachers may not intentionally be leaving out minority students, but it is still happening and should be acknowledged and addressed. CRT theorists suggest that racism affects teacher beliefs, which play a role in leaving students out of honors and AP courses, whether intentionally or even fully realized. Teachers must be intentional about ways to increase minority students' participation in AP and Honors and provide support to the students who do so. Because the setting of the study was predominantly made up of White school personnel, it can be deduced that they either inadvertently or overtly are responsible for keeping honors and AP courses disproportionately White. Additionally, White teachers may tend to include people and works from their own culture as major parts of the curriculum and not include authors and works by other cultures such as Black and Hispanic. Again, this sends a message that the White culture is dominant and more important in power and influence and what is considered normal.

Implications

The results of this study to understand the lived experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in AP and Honors classes has myriad implications in school systems empirically, theoretically, and practically. School personnel can learn valuable information to improve access for diverse populations in AP and honors courses in their schools. Findings of this study support a need for equal access to advanced courses for minority students specifically Black and Hispanic students. Further, involving parents of minority students directly in the educational lives of minority students can bring about needed progress. Finally, using a variety of identification measures for identifying students for AP and honors classes is needed to encourage equal access.

Empirical Implications

The results of this study show that minority students need more encouragement from school personnel to participate in honors and AP courses. One student remarked, “I haven’t gotten any support, but I haven’t not gotten support. It’s just no one has said anything.” The participants suggested that building relationships with students of color will help teachers to bridge the gap that exists in AP and honors participation between White students and students of color.

In addition, students need their parents to stand up for them and give them the support they need gain access to AP and honors classes. All participants claimed that their parents were their number-one supporters. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that minority students’ parents understand their role in their child’s education and that they do have a voice and a right to champion their students and come to their defense when needed to ensure that these children are able to take honors and AP classes. Schools could aid this process by providing additional resources for parents of minority students—especially those parents who may not have a college background—so that parents can better meet the needs of their gifted student. For example, Jay reported that he felt some parents were unaware of the requirements their child needed to meet for college acceptance, especially with regard to test scores. School counselors can assist parents by providing college information workshops and free test-preparation classes.

The study findings confirm that minority students—specifically Black and Hispanic students—benefit from having school personnel using multiple identification methods when determining placement for honors and AP courses. Study participants shared several identification methods, including standardized tests, teacher recommendations, past class performance and parent recommendations. For example, Kendra shared that she took the gifted

test in elementary and middle school, but never passed it except in the creative area. Therefore, she was unable to take an AP course until 11th grade when she transferred to GPHS, a school that uses multiple methods for recommending students for honors and AP courses. Further, schools must not stop identification processes that occur in elementary and middle school to place students in honors and AP courses. For example, many public schools do not test for identification of gifted status after the eighth grade. Some students may have developmental delays or may simply become more motivated to succeed when they get to high school. Therefore, it is important to continue testing and/or recommending minority students for honors or AP classes in the ninth through 12th grades.

Finally, the study findings suggest that White and minority students must come together and understand their differences and unique characteristics in order to build stronger relationships with one another. The relationship should be grounded in an understanding of the racism that is inherent in all people and to be able to openly discuss issues that arise out of those beliefs, whether inadvertent or overt. According to Karhama,

It's sad that we live in a world as such where we all can't just be friends because we have two different colors of our skin; our skin colors are different, but that's just the world we live in, that we haven't overcome racism.

Being able to acknowledge that our differences are not as great as they are sometimes perceived to be can bring new understandings for students that will have an impact on society.

Theoretical Implications

Derrick Bell's CRT (Delgado and Stefanic, 2002) encourages diverse classrooms with no achievement gap between White and Black students. The study represented an effort to understand the experiences of high-achieving Hispanic and Black students to encourage an

increase in participation in AP and honors classes for them. Therefore, it should be the responsibility of White educators to seek out ways to include more Black students in their recommendations for honors and AP courses (Davis et al., 2013). The Black students may show different characteristics of giftedness than those of White students simply because of differing cultural backgrounds. When it comes to teachers finding Black students to recommend for honors and AP courses, there should be some expectation of differences. The teachers must realize that different does not mean better or even less than; it simply means different. Teachers should also not think of identifying students in different ways as lowering standards.

Additionally, once students are in the classes it is expected that they will achieve academic success at the same rate as their White classmates. The CRT suggests that the majority will exert its power and influence on the minority. In their current state, White students make up the majority population in AP and honors classes. Therefore, the beliefs, values, and characteristics of White students will be perceived as the norm in those classes and anyone who does not follow those same characteristics will be viewed as “other” and different. Christy commented, “Most Black schools don’t have the teachers, the education, so, like, they’re not as smart and so when people do find, like, a Black smart person they’re like, shocked.” Other study participants also pointed out similar sentiments from White students. This points to the false premise that being Black and being smart cannot be synonymous or that it is an anomaly instead of the norm.

Practical Implications

Teacher relationships that are both supportive and serve to challenge students are needed to encourage success of minority students in AP and honors courses. Each of the participants commented that teacher relationships in their AP and honors classes were strong and

encouraging. Karhma said, “All of my teachers have high expectations for me to excel.” Further, it is important that teachers not lump all minority students into the same categories and expect them to have the same characteristics and qualities. They should not assume that all minority students have the same experiences, values, or beliefs.

Although minority student relationships with White students in their AP and honors courses were mostly positive, the participants noted that there were often negative racial undertones prevalent in comments and actions of White students. Teachers, school administrators, and other support personnel should seek to implement educational programs that encourage student diversity and help to connect students on common ground. Further, teachers should include curriculum that includes people and literature from different cultural backgrounds. It would also be beneficial for students to have explicit education on issues of race and racism in current culture.

All participants in the study had supportive and involved parents who helped to foster their education. They had the needed support to get them into honors and AP courses. However, there are many minority students left out of participation in honors and AP courses because they do not have the parental support. Kendra stated, “I was happy that my parents are involved as compared to my other friends that didn’t really get that support system.” Those students need school support staff and teachers to come alongside them and encourage them to take AP and honors courses and to provide them the support that they would otherwise not have due to a lack of parental involvement. This is just one way to help increase participation of minority students in AP and honors classes and to guide them to academic achievement.

The AP and honors application process can be very rigid in some schools relying only on test scores that have been proven time and time again to be inherently biased toward students of

color. GPHS does a great job of identifying students for honors and AP courses through a variety of ways. For example, students are encouraged and allowed to take honors and AP courses based on their test scores, teacher recommendations, class performance, and parent recommendation. If more schools used these same diverse methods, it would possibly increase minority participation in AP and honors courses.

To aid in decreasing the achievement gap between White students and students of color, schools should provide more hands-on support to minority students who take AP and honors courses. Further, these study participants mentioned that White parents will spend thousands of dollars paying for test-prep classes that aid students in possibly earning higher test score. It would be beneficial if schools provided test prep as part of the curriculum to meet the needs of minority students who cannot afford to pay extra to receive test prep. Further, minority students who are high-achieving and do not have as much parental support need teachers and other school personnel to check on them periodically to make sure that these students have the tools they need to be successful.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations in this study consisted of limiting the number of participants to 11 students who were all from the same school. Further, the findings are limited because all participants came from affluent backgrounds. Because the study took place in an affluent, mostly White, private school and the Hispanic and Black students in the study were also from affluent families, it limited the possibility that the same findings in this study would occur in schools with different demographics. The students were chosen because I had easy access to them, I already had an established relationship with them, and they had all been students in my class at some point during the time frame of this study.

Limitations to the study resulted because all students who participated in the study did not complete the journal responses. Of the 11 participants, only two of the students completed all four journal responses and only five total students submitted at least one of the four journal responses. This resulted in limiting the triangulation of the study. Further limiting the study was the order in which the data were collected. For example, the focus group interviews were conducted before the individual interviews, which could have influenced participant answers to the questions that were asked in the individual interviews.

Recommendations for Future Research

Replicating the study in public schools is of imminent necessity to understand the discrepancy between Hispanic and Black and White students' enrollment in AP and honors courses. To completely understand the phenomenon of a smaller number of Hispanic and Black students taking AP and honors courses, compared to the number of White students taking those courses, I recommend conducting studies similar to this study in various public and private school settings. Because this study was conducted in a mostly White, affluent, private school, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar study in a public school with many minority students who are Black and Hispanic as well as a public school with a small minority population similar to the private school used in this study. Future research should also address the small number of Black and Hispanic male students in honors and AP courses. Further, students in this study were all from the same affluent demographic and had parents who had similar educational backgrounds. As a result, it would be beneficial to conduct the study with Hispanic and Black students from varying demographics. Finally, I had previous relationships with the participants in the study. Therefore, that relationship could have impacted the responses of the students in this study, so it would be relevant to similar future research that the researcher have no

connection to the participants. Additionally, only student participants were used in the study. It would be beneficial to interview teachers, administrators, and other school support personnel to get their experiences with Hispanic and Black students' participation in honors and AP courses.

There are several areas of minority participation in AP and honors classes that were not addressed in this study. While the achievement gap was mentioned several times by study participants, explicit questions about the achievement gap were not addressed with the students. Participant scores on AP exams were not reported or examined. Students who participated in the study had earned at least a 3.0 GPA. However, their exact grades in AP and honors classes were not reported or analyzed. It would be beneficial in future studies to add explicit questions about the participants' academic achievement in AP and honors courses.

Socioeconomic status and social impact are also not explicitly explored in this study. Although the participants were enrolled in an affluent private school at the time of the study, students' socioeconomic backgrounds were not identified. Future researchers should explore the connection between socioeconomic status and participation in honors and AP courses. Further, students were not asked about how their participation in AP and honors courses impacted society, nor was this area studied. Therefore, the study findings neither confirm nor deny a positive or negative larger social impact based on minority participation in AP and honors classes.

Summary

Participants in this study reported that their experiences with AP and honors courses led to successful high school participation. They reported that their parents were the integral part to their success, and that they also built strong relationships with their teachers. They felt student relationships were mostly positive, but they felt that racial issues were prevalent in their classes

even though it was mostly inadvertent on the part of the other students. Additionally, students need constant encouragement in their courses to achieve at the same level as their White counterparts. The rigorous, challenging, and competitive environment in the honors and AP courses fosters critical and higher-order thinking skills that increase the achievement of Hispanic and Black students in honors and AP courses. Participants wanted to see more students of color in their AP and honors courses, and they felt that teachers should do a better job of encouraging them to enroll in AP classes. Further, the participants felt that the honors and AP application process should be more streamlined so that students clearly understand the requirements and steps to follow to participate in them. They felt that one test should not determine their participation in AP and honors classes, but a variety of factors should be used to recommend students of color and increase minority students' access to AP and honors courses.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

7/28/2016

Kristy Simpson

IRB Approval 2070.072816: High Achieving Hispanic and Black High School Students' Experiences in Honors and Advanced Placement Courses

Dear Kristy Simpson,

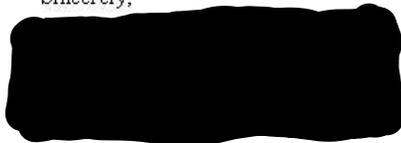
We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

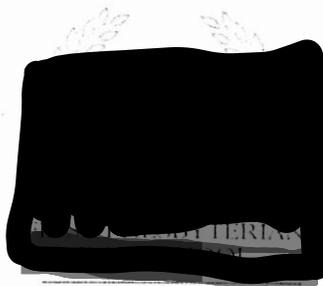
Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**LIBERTY**
UNIVERSITY*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

APPENDIX B: SITE PERMISSION LETTER



a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence

[Redacted]

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to acknowledge that Kristy Simpson Alvarez a doctoral student at Liberty University and a faculty member at [Redacted] School has permission to complete the study High Achieving Hispanic and Black High School Students' Experiences in AP and Honors Classes at [Redacted] in [Redacted], Georgia. [Redacted] School will be the primary site for the study and students from [Redacted] School will be involved in the study. Please let me know if you have questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

[Redacted signature block]

[Redacted] Georgia [Redacted]

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date: June 15, 2017

Potential Research Participant

Recruitment Letter

Graduate Student Liberty University

Dear Potential Research Participant:

As a graduate student in the Education Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctorate Degree in Educational Leadership. Additionally, I am conducting research to better understand the experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and Advanced Placement courses. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of high achieving Hispanic and Black students in honors and Advanced Placement courses, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

Participants in this study must be Hispanic or Black students in grades 9-12, have a GPA of at least 3.0 and be enrolled now or in the past in an honors or AP course, or be Hispanic or Black and a recent high school graduate in the classes of 2013-2017, have graduated with a 3.0 GPA or higher and must have participated in at least one honors or AP course in High School. If you meet these requirements and are willing to participate you will be asked to participate in an in-person interview with me, the primary researcher and to complete 4 journal response prompts about your experiences in your honors and/or AP courses while in high school. Additionally, you will receive a follow-up telephone interview if needed to clarify responses made during the in-person interview. It should take approximately four weeks for you to complete the procedure[s] listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be required.

To participate you should complete and return the consent document to me and I will contact you to schedule an interview. You can contact me at ksimpson2@liberty.edu or by phone at [REDACTED]

A consent document attached to this letter should be returned to me as well if you agree to participate in the research study.

If you choose to participate you will not be compensated; however, if you return your consent letter you will receive a \$10 restaurant gift card.

Sincerely,

Principal Researcher

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

High Achieving Hispanic and Black Students' Experiences in Honors and Advanced Placement Courses: A Phenomenology
Kristy Simpson Alvarez
Liberty University
Department of Education

You have been invited to be in a research study of High Achieving Hispanic and Black Students' Experiences in Honors and Advanced Placement Courses. You will be part of the study as a participant. You have been selected as a possible participant because you are a Black or Hispanic Honor Student who has participated in Advanced Placement and/or honors courses. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Kristy Simpson Alvarez, a student at Liberty University, in the Department of Education.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of Hispanic and Black students in Honors and Advanced Placement Courses.

Procedures:

If you consent to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

- Be interviewed in person by me and have me video record the interview. The interviews will take place over a 4-week period.
- I may call or email you after the initial interview for follow-up information or for clarification of information obtained during the interview. This would take place after the 4-week time-period in which all the interviews will be conducted.
- Maintain a journal of his or her thoughts and experiences in honors and AP courses in response to prompts I will give you.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has several risks: The risks of this study are minimal to you and no more than what you would encounter in your everyday life. All information that you provide will be kept confidential. However, if you provide any information that is considered mandatory for reporting such as child abuse, child neglect, or intent to harm self or others, I will contact the appropriate officials and disclose the information to them.

The benefits of participation are only what may also benefit society. You will not receive any direct benefits for participation in this study. This study will possibly benefit society by helping school personnel and constituents understand the experiences that minority students have in honors and Advanced Placement courses. Additionally, the hope is that school personnel and constituents will be better able to meet the needs of high achieving minority students to increase their participation in honors and Advanced Placement courses. Further, on a large scale, it is hoped that the study will aid in improving the achievement gap that exists in K-12 education between minority students and Caucasian students.

Compensation:

You will not receive payment of any kind for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. Data will be stored on my computer and an external flash drive, which will both be password protected.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you wish to withdraw from the study, you should contact me immediately and inform her of the desire to withdraw from the study. Contact can be made via telephone or email to me.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

Contacts and Questions:

I conducting this study is Kristy Simpson Alvarez. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ksimpson2@liberty.edu or [REDACTED] or her advisor Dr. Kenneth Tierce at ktierce@liberty.edu or [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than I, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The study will involve audio-video and or video-recordings of all interviews. By checking this box you are indicating that you are giving your consent to such documentation of the interviews.

Signature of student: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX E: QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Table 1

Open-ended Interview Questions

Questions

Student Questions

1. Describe your hobbies and interests.
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What courses are you currently taking?
4. Have you ever been recommended by a teacher or other school personnel to take an honors, gifted, or Advanced Placement course?
5. For the honors, gifted or Advanced Placement courses that you have taken, how did you get into those classes?
6. Have you ever been asked to take an honors or Advanced Placement class, but chosen not to do so?
7. What do you think is the process or steps to be able to take an honors, gifted or Advanced Placement course at your school?
8. If you wanted to take an honors, gifted or Advanced Placement course, what steps would you take to get into the class?
9. Describe your experiences with teachers and students in your honors, gifted, and Advanced Placement classes.
10. How do your peers react to you being in an honors or Advanced Placement class?

11. Describe your relationships with other students who are in your Advanced Placement, honors, or gifted courses as compared to your relationships with students in the other courses that you have taken.
 12. Describe your feelings about how accepted you are by the other members of your class who are also in honors, gifted, and Advanced Placement classes?
 13. How are Advanced Placement, honors, or gifted classes that you have taken different from other classes that you have taken?
 14. Describe the differences between the Advanced Placement, honors or gifted classes that you have taken with regards to the expectations placed on you by the teachers.
 15. Describe the level of difficulty and rigor in the content and coursework required in Advanced Placement, honors, or gifted courses as compared to other classes that you have taken.
 16. Describe the support you receive in school academically as a gifted student.
 17. Describe your parents' involvement in your education.
 18. What are your parents' educational backgrounds and careers?
 19. Do you have any additional information you would like to share?
-

APPENDIX F: JOURNAL PROMPTS FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Participants are asked to keep a journal for four weeks. Each week the students are encouraged to write a total 300-500word responses to the following questions as a whole.

1. What major assignments are you working on this week in your Advanced Placement and/or honors courses?
2. What are you succeeding in this week with regards to your class assignments?
3. What are you struggling with in your class assignments?
4. Have you sought support or help from your teacher or other classmates on your struggles this week?