CREATING EQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN

MALES THROUGH ADVANCED ACADEMICS

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Across the United States, African American males face barriers to securing a quality education. Barriers such as educational gatekeeping, and low identification, have caused African American males' enrollment in advanced placement courses to be at a rate lower than all other ethnicity and gender populations. A qualitative approach to research was used to explore how and in what ways district and school leaders created or hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. Through the lens of critical social theory, individual face-to-face interviews with district/campus educators and a focus group interview with African American male students, the lived experiences of participants within the advanced placement program were brought to the fore. Three questions guided the study: 1) How do district and school policies and practices create equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males; 2) How and in what ways do district and school leaders create or hinder equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males; and 3) What conditions have supported or hindered African American males in their ability to enroll and succeed in advanced academic courses. Findings revealed four themes to creating equity for African American males within the advanced placement program which included, the need to cultivate the advanced placement program, identify academic shortcomings, support the needs of students, and address invisible African American males. The research demonstrated that African American males can, and will, thrive in the most challenging of academic settings when provided with proper supports.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

After numerous educational reauthorizations of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (1965), such as *No Child Left Behind* (2002) and most recently, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015), the United States educational system is not providing the educational opportunities that African American males need in order to close the opportunity gap when compared with other ethnic populations (Ford & Moore, 2013). The original goal of ESEA was to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for children coming from lower-income families using federal funding (Casalaspi, 2017). Although education is seen as a state right, under NCLB, the federal government took a bigger role in accountability through the requirement of state testing of all students. ESSA sought to roll back the reach of the federal government, in particular the influence of the Secretary of Education (Egalite, Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2017).

Even with these reforms, the opportunity gap between African American males and White and Latino males in reading and mathematics is still wide after decades of research and efforts to decrease it (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Nationally, data indicate that African American high school students, on average, perform four years behind White students in reading and mathematics (Barton, 2003; Barton & Coley, 2009). In addition, African American males are enrolling in fewer advanced academic classes than European-Americans. When compared to White males across the nation, African American males lag behind by over 10% when looking at enrollment in at least one AP course (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

In the U.S. public education system, as well as in American society, African American males tend to be viewed as low-achievers, disruptors, and troublemakers (Allen, 2015; Kenyatta,

2012; McGee, 2013). African American males receive a higher percent of discipline infractions than any other student population in public schools (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Kenyatta, 2012; Noguera, 2003). This furthers the notion of the school-to-prison pipeline, a concept that arose from the fact that students who face increased disciplinary actions against them become disenfranchised in their educational setting and start their journey through the United States penal system. As Wald and Losen (2003) pointed out, the same punitive mentality that results in the over-representation of youth of color who land in trouble at school extends to the juvenile justice system. These authors confirm that African American youth are six times more likely to be confined than White youth for the same offense.

Cultural differences between the educational system and the African American community continue to cause friction. Noguera (2014) noted, "The inability of urban schools to respond to the complex environmental challenges confronting the communities they serve has exacerbated the challenges confronting African American males" (p. 115). Understanding the social context is not about feeling sorry for the lived realities facing many urban Black males (Warren, 2016). In today's society, what has happened is a sense of victim blaming of those who are placed in unfortunate circumstances, and this victim blaming does not take into account decades of discrimination and denial of equitable opportunities. This has recently been seen in media through countless accounts of police brutality exercised against young African American males. Often the defense heard from those in power is if Black males stopped resisting arrest they would not be placed in situations that would place their lives at risk. Those in power fail to realize that African American males are at risk every day, by a multitude of sources, simply for being Black. Furthermore, the under-education of African American males has been tolerated in America, largely because it has been written off as a Black problem. Noguera (2015) stated in

his afterword:

> Rather than being embraced as an American problem and challenge, our leaders in politics, business and education, have implored the Black community to do something, while washing their hands of responsibility for the failure of the public institutions that should serve them. (p. 52)

The African American community, school officials, and educators are well aware that urban public education is failing in its major goal of educating African American male students (Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015). Yet, the African American community continues to grow frustrated with failing schools that leave African American males feeling academically inadequate or inferior by the time they reach high school (Kincaid & Yin, 2011).

The opportunity gap continues to be the greatest for Black males when considering all racial/ethnic and gender groups. And the gap between graduation outcomes for Black males compared to their White, Asian, and Latino male counterparts continues to widen (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ford, 1996; Klopfenstein, 2004; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). When looking at graduation completion, Black males are also lagging behind Black females by over nine percentage points. This gap continues into post-secondary education degree attainment with Black males lagging behind Black females by eight percentage points (College Board, 2010). It is also imperative to state that, when looking at these gaps, all African American males are not the same. Celious and Oyserman (2001) said that in the United States, race is seen as Blacks contrasted with Whites for generalization purposes. The authors went further to say that differences in socioeconomic status, gender, and skin tone greatly affect academic outcomes and within-group status for African American males. In a study conducted on three distinctly different campuses of higher education, Harper and Nichols (2008) drilled further to find six distinct subgroups of Black men, further solidifying the inappropriateness of treating Black students as a monolithic group.

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When looking at the literature, no one variable or correlate is responsible for the persistent and pervasive achievement gap between African American males and White males (Ford & Moore, 2013). There are numerous factors that contribute to this gap. Those factors include, but are not limited to, a myriad of societal issues such as low teacher expectations due to deficit thinking (Ford, 1996; Klopfenstein, 2004; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008); and a lack of cultural awareness on behalf of educators and educational structures that have impeded, rather than helped nurture and grow, the intellectual capacity of African American males (Ford & Moore III, 2013; Henfield, Washington, & Byrd, 2014; Kenyatta, 2012). Public education remains the best vehicle and platform to deliver many of the supports necessary to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Positioning African American males to secure a high school diploma, which prepares them for postsecondary training and education, creates a clear pathway out of poverty (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

The problem of practice is that African American males continue to face inequities in their educational experiences. Due to these inequities, African American males lag behind White, Asian, and Latino male populations, along with African American females, in high school graduation completion rates and post secondary degree attainment. The historical context and the accompanying trauma experienced by generations of African-Americans impact their academic achievement, particularly males (Gill, 2014). Focused resources need to be allocated toward African American students to ensure they achieve their true potential. Regarding the allocation of resources, equity in education does not mean equal. Equity in education means that all students have access to a world-class education that consists not only of mastery of core subjects but also of training in problem-solving and critical thinking, as well as in 21st-century

concerns such as financial literacy and global awareness (Equity & Excellence Commission, 2013). In the absence of equitable practices, students of color, particularly Black males, do not fare well in the public education system (Gill, 2014). The issue then becomes defining, and putting into action, what equity needs to look like for the African American male educational experience.

Conceptual Framework

The central focus of the research in this study involved examining not only the social-emotional, physical, and structural resources and supports that existed or are absent in the academic lives of African American males but also district policies and practices that created a system that benefits some students academically over others. With this focus, along with emerging themes from the literature, the advanced academic equity model (AAEM) served as the conceptual framework that undergirds the current study. There are frameworks that look at race and others that look at advanced academics, but there are few that look at how students interact with the social structures that surround them.

The foundation of this framework acknowledges that African American males are underrepresented in advanced academic courses due to numerous structural barriers. Ford (1995) argued that a lack of teacher referrals is the number one reason why students of color are under-referred for gifted and AP programs. Whiting and Ford (2009) contend that teachers and counselors often are the gatekeepers of gifted education and frequently under-refer Black students for identification and screening. Consequently, African American males are placed in classes that provide inferior educational experiences compared to other students within the system (Ford, 1996, 1998; Kenyatta, 2012; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). These barriers only compound as African American males matriculate through the educational system, and the

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policies and practices to counter these barriers rest with district and school leaders.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the framework, which shows the interaction of the core tenets of critical social theory (false consciousness, crisis, education, and transformative action) with the roles and responsibilities of the leaders within the educational setting (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). In order to examine fully each level of the educational setting (district, school, classroom) data was analyzed through the lens of critical social theory. The AAEM, through the lens of critical social theory, examined the influence that school leaders and school policy had on African American males within the educational site. It also looked to identify what crises African American males faced while being part of the Advanced Placement program. Going further, the AAEM identified what conditions and practices encouraged or hindered African American males in finding success within the Advanced Placement program. Finally, transformative action detailed what corrective actions need to be made within the educational site in order to ensure that African American males receive equitable advanced academic opportunities.
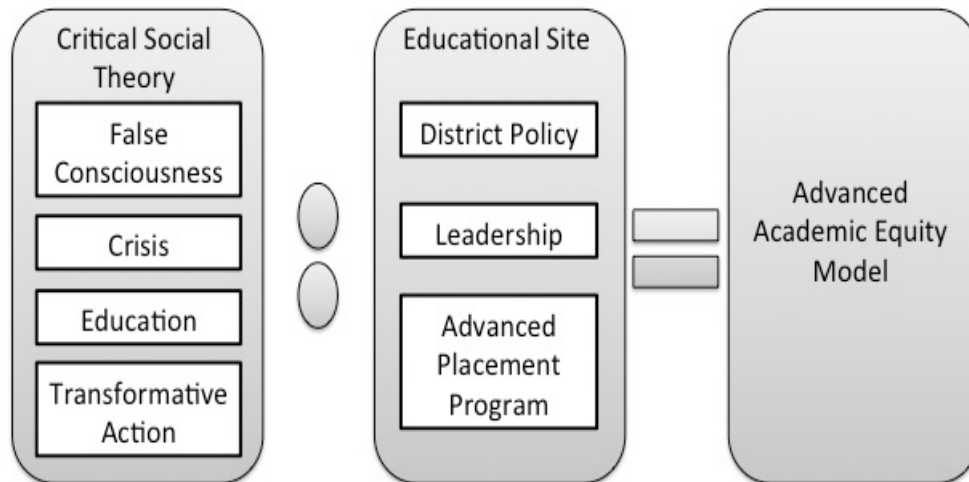
Figure 1. Conceptual framework. This graphic depicts the advanced academic equity model that results from the interaction of the critical social theory with district policy, leadership, and the Advanced Placement program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how and in what ways district and school leaders created or hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. The primary function of advanced academic programs within the public education system is to prepare students for the rigors of post-secondary education. This opportunity has been extended to some populations within the United States more than others. The ultimate benefit of enrolling in advanced academic courses, such as Advanced Placement, is academic success at the college and university level. There is a body of work on advanced academic programs such as Advanced Placement, but very few scholars have researched the impact that these courses have on the academic outcomes of African American males or the barriers that keep African American males out of these highly rigorous courses.

Research Question(s)

The overarching question that was used to guide this study is as follows: How do district and school policies and practices create or hinder equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males? The following sub-questions assist in answering the overarching research question:

A. How do district and school leaders create equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males?

B. What conditions have supported or hindered African American males in their ability to enroll and succeed in advanced academic courses?

Significance of the Study

Data from the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that African American males performed below the standard and did not graduate at the same rates as

White, Asian and Latino males or African American females (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). This was troubling because the success of the African American community and society in general are missing African American males as valuable contributors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how and in what ways district and school leaders created or hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. This was important because of the low percentage of African American males graduating from high school and moving on to the post-secondary level. This study was greatly needed in a society where the perception of African American males is negative and continues to move in a harmful direction for our nation. Through advanced academics, African American males can find academic success that can possibly lead to better economic and societal outcomes. The findings increased knowledge about why African American male advanced academics enrollment percentages were low. Further, the knowledge gained from this study could have a profound impact on creating equitable experiences for African American male students in today's educational system.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the specific and intentional choices made by the researcher that define and clarify the boundaries of the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Student participants for this study included only African American males who enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement course. Only one high school was used for this study. The focus was placed on three areas of inquiry: leadership, district/campus policy, and practices as they related to the Advanced Placement program. Variables of influence outside of the school setting were not analyzed and participants were not randomly selected.

Assumptions

Assumptions are ideas a researcher holds to be true but does not have evidence to support going into a study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Several assumptions were made going into this study. First and foremost, one assumption dealt with participant input. It was assumed that participants would be honest and truthful during all aspects of the data collection phase of the study. I also assumed that there was an absence of a plan at the educational site to ensure that African American males were represented appropriately in advanced academic courses. This assumption was based on the fact that African American males enrolled in advanced academic courses at half the rate of their White peers. And finally, I assumed that there were intentional efforts within the educational site to foster the academic ability of high-achieving African American males. This assumption was made on the fact that the district had been recognized in the 9th Annual AP District Honor Roll and that they received the distinction of having more than 30% enrollment of American Indians, African Americans and Latinx students (College Board, 2018).

Definition of Key Terms

In order to ensure clarity from the beginning, it is imperative to outline terminology from the start of the study.

- *Advanced academics*. Advanced academics is a continuum of a variety of services for the wide range of high potential and advanced students that includes Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. These courses provide high school students with the opportunity to engage in college level courses (Shaw, Marini & Mattern, 2012).

- *African American or Black male*. African American or Black is used interchangeably to identify American males whose parents are of African descent. They have also been identified

as an at-risk population in the American mainstream of education (Taylor & Brown, 2013).

- *Equity*. Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances, such as gender, ethnic origin, or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential. An equitable community looks to implement inclusive practices and promote cooperation between groups (Egalite, Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2017).

- *High achieving student*. High achieving students are students who meet or exceed the requirements for student performance and achievement based upon state standards (Ford & Moore, 2013).

- *Low achieving student*. Low achieving students are students who fall below the requirements for student performance and achievement based upon state standards (Ford & Moore, 2013).

- *Underachieving student*. Underachieving students are students who should be performing at a higher level academically but don't because of social and educational factors (Ford & Moore, 2013).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, statement of the problem, conceptual framework, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, delimitations, assumptions, and definition of key terms. Chapter 2 presents a review of applicable literature. Chapter 3 describes the process and methodology utilized in conducting the qualitative case study, research questions, research design and rationale, sample and population, instrumentation and data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. Analysis of the data and findings of the study are

presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 concludes the study with a discussion of findings, implications, and recommendations for research moving forward.

Summary

The gap in the educational opportunities for African American males is troublesome. The bigger issue is how persistent the gap has become. Some educators do not know, or do not want to acknowledge, that the gap exists. Others are uninterested in recognizing the racial disparities that are interwoven throughout all aspects of society, including the educational system. African American males are voiceless to the inequities that they go through on a daily basis. These inequities manifest when African American males graduate or drop out of high school. The aim of this study was to examine district and school policies and practices that created equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. The following chapter reviews the literature that was relevant to the study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Presented in this literature review are studies about what is known about the many

barriers that African American males face in having an equitable educational experience in the

United States public education system. Although great care has been taken to identify many of

these barriers within the literature, new barriers will constantly materialize to challenge African

American males who strive for a high-quality educational experience. Many of the barriers that

have been identified, such as educator bias—an unconscious racial bias toward African

American males, are implicit in nature and deeply engrained in the core of our society. Because

of this, they are difficult to eradicate. The purpose of this study was to explore how and in what

ways district and school policies and practices created or hindered equitable advanced academic

program opportunities for African American males. This chapter presents literature reviewed

that relates to the purpose of this study. The headings of Advanced Placement program,

underrepresentation in advanced academics, the critical social theory framework, and the

(mis)education of the African American male in the public school system guided the

development of this chapter.

In the United States, African Americans constitute 14.5% of students in the public

education system (College Board, 2014). Yet, only 9% of this population participated in the

Advanced Placement program and completed the AP course exam (College Board, 2014).

African American males constitute 7.9% of students in the public education system. Yet African

American males only represented 3.6% of the student population that participated in taking at

least one Advanced Placement course (College Board, 2014). Across the nation, White males

accounted for 27% and Latino males accounted for 7% of the total population enrolled in at least

one AP course. African American males also lagged behind African American females, which accounted for 6% of the total population enrolled in at least one AP course (Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Of the African American male Advanced Placement exam-taking population, only 4% scored a three or above (the required passing score) on the Advanced Placement exam that is used to receive college credit (College Board, 2014). The College Board, the creators of the Advanced Placement program, investigated ways to decrease the opportunity gap in the percentages of African American and White males scoring a three or above on the Advanced Placement exam. In their report they identified key strategies such as aligning curriculum and instruction, removing financial barriers, supporting teacher professional development, and identifying and recruiting students with potential as ways to address the opportunity gap (College Board, 2014).

Wiggan and Watson (2016) argued that one of the faults of the United States educational system was its lack of true inclusion of people of color in the curriculum. In their case study of a high performing minority school, they found that taking a village approach and incorporating multiculturalism and anti-racism education in the school curriculum connected students to each academic subject. There have been slight concessions recently to include those voices, but the rate of those changes is slow. This is due to the history of the educational system being rooted in White, middle class American culture (Ford, 2010). This culture has resulted in a teacher workforce that (1) consists of predominantly White, middle-aged women (Henfield, Washington, & Byrd, 2014); (2) utilizes less-experienced teachers to work with urban youth (Ford & Moore III, 2013); (3) employs a tracking system that tends to place White students in upper level classes and students of color in lower level classes (Ford, 1996; Klopfenstein, 2004); (4) incorporates a gifted and talented advanced academics identification system that consistently

under-refers students of color (Ford, 1998; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002); and (5) has a curriculum that is based on Euro-American history with little attention to the history of the oppressed (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995).

Advanced Placement Program

The Advanced Placement (AP) program, administered by the College Board, was created in 1955 to provide high school students with a more rigorous educational experience (Scafidi, Clark, & Swinton, 2015). There currently are over 30 courses that students can choose from, including music history and numerous English courses. Each Advanced Placement course is modeled after a comparable college course and is developed in collaboration with college and university faculty (Klopfenstein, 2004; Shaw, Marini, & Mattern, 2013; Wilson, Slate, Moore, & Barnes, 2014). Each course culminates with an end-of-course Advanced Placement exam that is scored from 1 to 5. A student that scores a 5 would have the equivalent grade of an A and students who score a 1 would have the equivalent grade of an F. Students who score a 3 or above on AP exams have the option of earning college credit, or course exemptions, after submitting their scores to their respective college or university (Shaw, Marini, & Mattern, 2012).

Scafidi, Clark, and Swinton (2015) explained why students should take AP courses.

> There are at least three arguments for AP coursework in high school. First, AP coursework may provide a challenge for those students who might otherwise be bored by the typical high school coursework and risk becoming disengaged. The second argument is that the advanced material in AP courses increases human capital more than the corresponding 'regular' high school course. That is, perhaps AP courses better prepare students for college than what they might otherwise experience in high school. Third, students who successfully complete AP coursework in high school may receive college credit, which may reduce expenses in college. (p. 349)

The College Board has challenged students within the educational system and provided incentives for students to perform at a high level on the Advanced Placement exam by working with colleges and universities to grant credits and exemptions (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). This

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sounds like a winning formula, but beneath the surface the AP program is fraught with inequities. In regard to advanced academics, the AP program has inadvertently impacted student access to elite postsecondary institutions (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Students who attend affluent schools have more AP course offerings than those in the urban school settings (Scafidi, Clark, & Swinton, 2015). There is also a discrepancy in the quality of instruction between the two types of schooling (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). This causes a gap in enrollment of students of color compared to White students and adds to the AP exam score chasm (Klopfenstein, 2004).

Over the last couple of decades, there has been a push against standardized tests due to teachers teaching to the test (Stotsky, 2016). This movement caused many educators to question the relevance of the AP program since the structure of the program, and its curriculum, is based around an end-of-year standardized test. This method of measuring achievement in the US educational system has been proven unreliable for the task and has forced educators to teach to the test (Schneider, 2009). Although colleges and universities use AP exam scores for earning college credit, they look more at what AP courses students take and the AP course grade for college admission (Shaw et al., 2012). This provides students who struggle with standardized tests an incentive to pursue a track focusing on AP courses.

In the pursuit of equity in education, especially in the realm of advanced academics, marginalized populations face a number of barriers that hinder their progress. Teachers (1) under-refer African American males for gifted and talented and advanced academic educational programs (Ford, 1998; Gill, 2014; Henfield, Moore III, & Wood, 2008; Kenyatta, 2012), (2) provide lower educational experiences to African American males compared to others (Ford, 1996; Klopfenstein, 2004; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008), (3) implicitly engage in systemic bias toward African American males (Ford & Moore III, 2013; Henfield, Washington, & Byrd,

2014; Kenyatta, 2012), and (4) fail to provide systemic supports such as working with parents of African American males to ensure that they are placed in the best position to succeed (Ford & Moore III, 2013; Noguera, 2003; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). These are only a few of the barriers that impact African American males resulting in detrimental educational experiences.

Underrepresentation in Advanced Academics

Although African American students made up 14.5% of the overall graduating class of 2013, only 9.2% were part of the AP exam-taker population, and only 4.6% of those who took exams scored a 3 or above on their given AP exam (College Board, 2014). In the College Board 10th Annual AP Report to the Nation, they reported that amongst African American students, only three out of ten students participate in a recommended AP science course (College Board, 2014). Misidentification of African American students in early educational settings leads to underrepresentation in advanced academic programs later (Davis, Davis, & Mobley, 2013).

Some African American students have been locked out of quality early childhood educational experiences, disadvantaging them upon entering public education due to low reading levels compared to their White and Latinx classmates (Barton & Coley, 2009; Ferguson, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Ferguson (2003) stated that when addressing performance disparities, teachers who saw Black children as possessing less potential would miss key opportunities to help Black children close the Black-White test score gap. According to Schneider (2009), Advanced Placement, just like other promising reforms in the U.S. with goals of addressing inequities in schools, has failed to even the playing field. Within a couple of years of being in the system, many students are screened for giftedness, and African American students are frequently missing or underrepresented in this group (Bonner II, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, Hill-Jackson, & James, 2009; Henfield et al., 2008; Kenyatta, 2012).

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This underrepresentation continues to increase as African American students progress through the educational system.

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2013), African American students made up 16% of the general population in public schools in the academic year of 2011-2012, yet only 3.5%, or 281,000 African Americans, were identified for the gifted and talented education program across the United States. To make matters worse, African Americans were the only marginalized population that did not show progress for decreasing this gap (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). All other marginalized groups, including Asian (13%), Latinx (4.6%), and Native American (5.2%), increased their gifted education participation over the past decades (US DOE OCR, 2013). Valencia (1997) posited deficit thinking as being the major reason for underrepresentation for African Americans. Valencia went on to define deficit thinking as blaming the victims for their alleged deficiencies, while leaving structures within the educational system that marginalize African Americans unchecked.

Although all student groups have seen significant growth over the past decades, African American students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses at half the rate of White students (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). In order to respond to low enrollment rates, public schools in Pittsburgh, for example, shifted their approach to gifted and AP programs by emphasizing the identification and development of all students who showed potential to succeed and who could benefit from being in gifted and AP courses, especially students living in poverty and students of color (Godley, Monroe, & Castma, 2015). Theoharis, Causton, and Tracy-Bronson (2016) found that when inclusion was a school-wide philosophy that progressed inclusive service delivery that was well thought out, it could result in social justice, equity, and improved academic achievement.

Across the nation, the number of African American males enrolling in at least one AP course is concerning. As mentioned earlier, the national average for African American males who enrolled in at least one AP course was 7.6% for the 2011-2012 school year. The range between the lowest and the highest states was astonishing. The state of Louisiana came in at the bottom, with enrollment of 2.6%, while the state of Maryland reported that 15.2% of African American males enrolled in at least one AP course. Although Maryland reported the highest percentage, they still fell short of the national average of White males enrolled in at least one AP course (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). If access to AP courses are going to be seen as the gatekeeper to a better life post grade school, something has to be done to ensure that African American males are getting through without being throttled (Matthews, 1998).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Social Theory

To begin to understand the state that African American males are currently in, critical social theory (CST) is an appropriate theoretical framework as the major component of my advanced academic equity model conceptual framework. This conceptual framework takes into account the "pervasive inequalities and injustices in everyday social relationships and arrangements" between African American males and the educational system in the United States (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010, p. 7).

CST gained its beginnings at the Frankfurt School under Felix Weil, who was interested in studying socialism and Marxism. As the times changed in the area, the focus of the school changed. Historically, the primary function of CST was the establishment of a sustained critique of all social formations, whether cultural, economic, or political, with an eye to preventing any one form from taking control of the world in a way that is antidemocratic, unjust, exploitative, or oppressive (Dant, 2003; Sherman, 2003). Connected to this is a belief that the knowledge

generated by oppressive systems has become so embedded in everyday practices that it is a distortion and misrepresentation of human experiences and desires (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010).

Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) offer a theoretical lens for assessing the relationships African American males have with the social structures and institutional practices they work within and encounter each day. CST has four main tenets: false consciousness, crisis, education, and transformative action.

False Consciousness

Within CST, false consciousness is the idea that the oppressed "have internalized the values, beliefs, and even world view of their oppressors and willingly cooperate with those who oppress them in maintaining those social practices that result in their oppression" (Fay, 1987, p. 107). The false narrative started when the first Africans were brought to America with the singular purpose of exploiting them for labor. Seemes (1992) said that the exploitation required a system of objectification and dehumanization which "became central to the process of domination in order to weaken the ability of the victimized people to sustain a self-conscious and self-directed sense of origin, evolution and purpose" (pp. 2-3). The rationale used was that Africans were not fully human, therefore were undeserving of respect and decency reserved for fellow human beings. Consequently, it was never the intent of the oppressors who kidnapped and brought Africans to America to acculturate/assimilate those very Africans into mainstream American culture or bestow upon them the rights and liberties granted to any other citizens in America (Lopez, 2003; Nash, 2006). White slave owners forced Africans, by way of coercion and violence, to remain in a subjugated state for the first two hundred and fifty years that Africans were in America. For the next almost one hundred years, the somewhat free people of

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African descent were subjected to a nationally accepted set of rules, such as Jim Crow laws, that severely limited their ability to exercise the basic rights guaranteed to all American citizens (Williams, 2007). "Segregation was a strategy to isolate and inferiorize African people. It was used as a method to facilitate economic exploitation and to maintain political subordination" (Semmes, 1992, p. 105). The idea of false consciousness is perpetuated to this day through the manipulation of current popular media, which has protected the history of the oppressors and slanted the historical context of the oppressed (Hutchinson, 1997). Within the educational setting, CST can be used to analyze how those in power have silenced the voices of African American males by way of policy and practices.

Crisis

The second tenet of critical social theory is crisis, which explains the plight of African American males within the educational system as being in a constant state of crisis. The identification of a genuine crisis whose resolution supports and enables reconciliation is not easy. Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) stated that the crises most likely to be first considered are themselves most apt to have been manufactured by systems of oppression. These systems of oppression, such as the educational system within the United States, has minimized the contributions of people of color and has contributed to an identity crisis for black people (Akbar, 1984; Leary, 2005). According to Jones (2017), the Black collective has unpacked dominant notions of inferiority with counterstories that allow individuals to contest racist structures. Author bell hooks (2003) elaborated on the importance of deflecting dominant White frames by saying:

> Most Black people are conscious that we live in a racist and White supremacist society. That is a basic state of awareness almost all Black people hold. Critical consciousness is at work when we are able to utilize our knowledge of this reality in ways that circumvent racist exploitation and oppression. (p. 70)

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Crises such as achievement gaps or welfare mothers contribute to maintaining a system in which people who are so identified are seen as problems in relation to people who are not, rather than considering that a system that contributes to these effects is in need of reconfiguration (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) argue that the oppressive systems within the United States (education, political, employment, finance, health) are meant to promote White supremacist ideology and to maintain a multifaceted state of crisis that pits people of color against each other for a limited share of the American Dream.

Education

In CST, education is not just about the formal education of African American males, but rather the teaching and learning that takes place in any social group involving African American males. America's educational system has gone through multiple reforms that are meant to meet the needs and expectations of the students that it serves. But according to scholar/educator Mwalimu Shujaa (1994), these reforms were never intended to meet the needs of any population other than America's ruling class:

> Fundamental change in schooling can only be accomplished within the framework of fundamental change in the society's power relations. While there are many who would cast schooling reforms as vehicles that can facilitate the achievement of unmet achievement expectations, I believe this is possible only when such expectations are not contradictory to the existing power relations. Reforms do not challenge schooling's role in the maintenance of status quo power relations in society. (p. 23)

For scholars like Freire (1970/2000), the cornerstone for liberating oneself from these hegemonic structures is critical pedagogy that promotes dialogue and engaging individuals in deep conversations that leads to change. Hence, school leaders must be prepared to engage individuals who are culturally different and cultivate learning environments that foster respect and intercultural understanding (Lopez, 2003). In these new settings, the educator becomes facilitator and participant in the dialogic process and assumes multiple roles such as interpreter,

translator, mediator, and storyteller (Clayson, Castaneda, Sanchez, & Brindis, 2002). A

commitment to active engagement and learning is necessary so that the dialogue that follows

encourages everyone to listen and learn as much as possible about the apparent issues, how these

issues are thought to have come about, how they are being expressed, and by whom (Freeman &

Vasconcelos, 2010).

Transformative Action

The fourth and last tenet, transformative action, is not a standalone idea, but rather woven

throughout the other areas of CST. People's awareness of their oppressive behavior or

complicity has to be accompanied by their response to it, which can only happen simultaneously

in practice (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Fay (1987) described the uniqueness of CST by

saying:

> Such a theory need not only be able to reveal how a particular social order functions, but
> also to show the way it is fundamentally unsatisfactory to those who live in it, and to do
> both of these things in such a manner that it becomes the moving force to help transform
> this order into something radically different. These theories would be practical in the
> sense of stimulating members of a society to alter their lives by fostering in them the sort
> of self-knowledge and understanding of their social conditions, which can serve as the
> basis for such alteration. (p. 23)

Transformative action does not happen overnight. Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010)

explain that it will take a concerted effort by those who have historically held positions of power

listening to the voices of people of color to create an equitable system for those who have been

historically oppressed. Transforming educational policy to create spaces for people of color is

just as important as dialogue. The ultimate goal of using CST is to not place blame on the

oppressed or the oppressors. The goal is a drive toward reconciliation. Reconciliation involves

the joint recognition by individuals who are positioned in unequal relation with each other, such

as teachers and students, of the way they both have been thus positioned by systems of

oppression (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). By questioning and dialoguing, stakeholders find out about themselves and their hopes and beliefs, as they work to construct and reconstruct a possible version of their social world (Schwandt, 2002). Only then can we understand the wrongs that need to be righted.

The (Mis)Education of African American Males in the Public School System

Throughout the literature, African American males have faced countless barriers from their induction into the public education school system. These barriers were found in multiple facets of the student's life, which included social, school, cultural/familial, and internal conflict. The following section highlights some, but not all, of the barriers that African American males encounter as they matriculate through the public educational school system.

Educational Tracking

As stated earlier, due to perceived educational shortcomings, some African American males are seen as behind as soon as they start their educational experience (Barton & Coley, 2009; Ferguson, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Because of a perceived deficit, they are placed in remedial classes that provide lower educational experiences compared to other students within the system (Ford, 1998, 1996; Kenyatta, 2012; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). These classes were believed to give African American males the opportunity to grow, but in actuality, those courses stunt student growth because the courses lack challenge. Once placed in developmental/remedial classes, African American males have very little chance to change their placement. African American educators taking part in a study by Taliaferro and Decuir-Gunby (2008) expressed concern that students were being classified into remedial, average, or gifted programs without continued assessment or on the basis of stereotypes and broad categorizations. Often, teacher recommendations are all that it takes to

place a student in a lower-tiered class due to what the referring educator perceived as underachievement.

Cultural Differences

Noguera (2003) asserted that students' ethnic or socioeconomic background governs how students are perceived and treated by adults within an educational environment. Students of color, especially African American males, have a greater chance of being placed in remedial or special education classes due to teacher perception of cultural differences (Kenyatta, 2012). Henfield et al. (2014) said that multiculturally competent school counselors must recognize cultural variables and understand how they work in their interactions with gifted Black male students, especially when those cultural differences are the most pronounced. Ford et al. (2002) stated that in institutions of higher education, most students graduate with a monocultural or ethnocentric curriculum that ill prepares them to work with culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. Because of their lack of training, new teachers consequentially may misunderstand cultural differences and see such traits as learning styles, behavioral styles, and communication styles as deficits.

Deficit thinking is one of the root causes of underrepresentation of historically underrepresented students in advanced academic programs such as gifted and talented and Advanced Placement. Ford and Moore III (2013) stated that deficit thinking fuels and feeds prejudicial and often unfounded beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. Ford and Moore III added that the primary belief is that African American males are culturally and/or genetically inferior to White American males. Ford et al. (2002) stated that when educators operate with a deficit thinking mindset, the following symptoms are present:

(1) Traditional IQ-based definitions, philosophies, and theories of giftedness;

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(2) Identification practices and policies that have a disproportionately negative impact on Black students (e.g., a reliance on teacher referral for initial screening);

(3) A lack of training aimed at helping educators in the area of gifted education;

(4) A lack of training aimed at helping teachers understand and interpret standardized test results;

(5) Inadequate training of teachers and other school personnel in multicultural education;

(6) Inadequate efforts to communicate with Black families and communities about gifted education; and

(7) Black students' decision to avoid gifted education programs.

Ford pointed out that this list of symptoms is far from exhaustive but highlights the major points that have to be combated in order to ensure that African American males are not underrepresented in advanced academic programs.

Teacher Quality

Teachers are the number one predictor of academic success in students (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Hattie, 2003). Hattie (2003) found that students taught by expert teachers exhibited an understanding of concepts that are more integrated, more coherent, and at a higher level of abstraction than students taught by other teachers. Unfortunately for African American males, there is a high possibility that they will be faced with inexperienced teachers throughout their educational journey if they are in the urban setting. In 2013, schools in an urban setting, with high percentages of African American students, employed teachers with less than three years of experience at double the rate as schools with low percentages of African American students (Ford & Moore III, 2013). This lack of experience affects all aspects of a student's educational experience, from the academic to the social-emotional components. Lack of experience often comes out in cultural misunderstandings that lead to over disciplining African American males (Allen, 2015; Kenyatta, 2012). This practice manifests itself in the form of in-

school and out-of-school suspensions with the highest form being expulsion from the public education setting. All forms lead to loss of instructional time, which causes students to get behind and continues the cycle of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Lack of experience also leads teachers to allow standardized testing to play a dominant role in identifying students for advanced academics. Ford et al. (2002) stated that as school districts saw increased racial and ethnic diversity, educators relied on biased standardized tests to identify students. These tests almost guaranteed lower test scores for culturally diverse groups that were unfamiliar with middle class American values, norms, and traditions. Because of the near exclusive reliance on test scores when making placement decisions, gifted programs demographically remained predominantly White and middle class in 2002 (Ford et al., 2002).

Ford (1995) stated that a lack of teacher referrals is the number one reason why historically underrepresented students are under-referred for gifted and AP programs. Whiting and Ford (2009) echoed this statement by saying that teachers and counselors often are the gatekeepers of gifted education and frequently under-refer Black students for identification and screening. The absence of marginalized students, particularly African American males, stems from a cultural difference between teachers and students. As stated earlier, a lack of preparation (higher education) in and sensitivity to the characteristics of gifted students, a lack of understanding of the social and emotional needs of gifted students, and a lack of attention to underachievement among gifted students all hinder teachers' abilities to make fair and equitable referrals (Ford et al., 2002). For African American males, encountering primarily White teachers who not only attempt to understand their unique cultural styles but who are also able to discern and identify their giftedness within these cultural frames is rare (Landsman & Lewis, 2006).

Lack of Access

The absence of the opportunity to take AP courses is just as detrimental to African American males' educational experiences as teacher quality. Klopfenstein (2004) stated that low-income students typically have reduced access to a culture of learning that establishes expectations for attending post-secondary education and that leads students to pursue a curriculum in high school that is rigorous enough to achieve this goal. Too often, African American males, by virtue of living in certain areas, attend public schools that offer very few AP courses, if any, compared to suburban schools (Ford & Moore III, 2013; Henfield et al., 2014; Zarate & Pachon, 2006). Because of schools being underfunded in the urban setting, having a lack of qualified teachers who can teach upper level AP courses such as AP Calculus and AP Physics is a frightening reality (Ford, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2012).

Some researchers have gone past access and pushed for equity in course quality. Hallett and Venegas (2011) stated that if students are not provided the same quality of instruction and coursework, they will be at a distinct disadvantage when taking AP exams and participating in college courses, once admitted. Students who were involved in a curriculum that was rigorous in high school were less likely to transfer between postsecondary institutions and more likely to graduate from college on time (Hallett & Venegas, 2011).

Social Norms/ Negative Stereotypes

African American males have the burden of fitting into numerous cultures that sometimes come into conflict with theirs. Educators use numerous negative stereotypes to describe African American males due to a misunderstanding of the African American culture. For example, poor, marginalized children have been perceived as lazy (Kenyatta, 2012). McGee (2013) noted that

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high school age Black males are often considered at-risk for being an academic underachiever, fatherless, violent, an athlete (in racialized sports like football and basketball), a high school dropout, and involved with the incarceration system, among many other negative stereotypes. Media sensationalism and discourse often contribute to the negative image of Black men as irresponsible, deviant, and uneducable (Allen, 2015). Because educators are part of the same society that produces these negative stereotypes, they must be careful of what lens they see African American males through. McGee (2013) suggested that when educators internalize these negative depictions of Black male students, there is great potential for them to operate according to these beliefs. This may result in transmitting low expectations to these students, which could have deleterious results for Black males in educational settings.

When educators are operating from a deficit thinking mindset, African American males have a choice to either fit the mold of what a good student should be and suppress characteristics of their own culture, or be seen as a disruption within the educational setting by exhibiting behaviors that are characteristic of their own culture (Ford et al., 2002). Ogbu (2004) argued that African American males would rather disengage from the academic setting to fit in with their peers. Any semblance of acting White or performing well academically could be seen as not wanting to be a part of the perceived stereotypes of African American culture, which would cause a rift between them and their peers (Allen, 2015; Webb, 2016). Although in a recent study by Allen (2015), African American males consciously balanced school and being cool, meeting their parents' academic expectations while also keeping peer group solidarity. Webb (2016) also went on to say that African American males embraced their academic abilities and charged their peers to do the same, signifying variation in how African American males responded to attacks against their academic and cultural identity.

Teacher Support and Relationships

Taliaferro and Decuir-Gunby (2008) stated that when students feel supported by their teachers, they are more likely to feel a sense of connection to school and are more likely to be academically successful. This supports the notion that the teacher is one of the main predictors of student success. Ferguson (2003) noted that students who have positive reciprocal relationships with teachers have higher outcomes and receive more academic support. A positive relationship that is built on trust provides the teacher support that students need. "If students do not believe that their teachers care about them and are actively concerned about their academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced" (Noguera, 2003, p. 449).

Care also must be taken to ensure that high expectations are placed on African American males. Teachers who hold high expectations are more likely to have students more motivated to succeed (Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). But high expectations without support will always end in frustration and soon failure. What ends up happening is that teachers have lower expectations for African American students, especially African American males (Garibaldi, 1992; Henfield et al., 2014). When this happens, African American males normally will play to those expectations due to their lack of engagement in the instruction. This can also manifest in defiance toward the instructor because of the instructor's inability to intellectually challenge African American males. A disconnect between educator and student leads to over disciplining with the cycle repeating continuously (Allen, 2015).

Parental Involvement

Having informed parents and helping them understand how to assist their African American male students in navigating and optimizing their educational experiences is paramount. In previous studies (Muller, 1998; Seyfried & Chung, 2002), it was found that

parental involvement plays a major role in student academic achievement (Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). Due to the parental duties of those who parent African American males, some parents do not have the flexibility to meet with teachers at the school to discuss academic matters that would further their student's success (Henfield et al., 2014). This should not be interpreted to mean those parents do not care about their students' academic success. Parents of African American males are very much concerned with their child's success (Ford et al., 2002). Even though they might not be very active in the schoolhouse, they are very active at home working with students and asking questions about their schooling (Crozier, 2001; Daniel-White, 2002).

Because parents of African American males often do not see teachers regularly to discuss their students' academic success, they are often not as informed about problems that come up at the school (Talieferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). If educators operate with a deficit thinking mindset, they may not communicate with historically underrepresented parents when it comes to programs such as advanced academics (Ford et al., 2002). Klopfenstein (2004) found that well-educated parents did not face this issue and received the academic support that their children needed in order to be successful. The reverse was found in parents that were not well educated and did not know how to navigate the academic path. The less understanding that parents had of advanced academic programs, the least likely they were to seek enrollment for their child. This lack of knowledge leads to low enrollment levels for students of color.

Positive Initiatives

With all of the negative attention that African American males get in the media and in the educational system, it would seem that everything is lined up for them to fail. Fortunately, there are numerous positive and successful initiatives that are working across America. But more research needs to be conducted to find out if these initiatives can work on a larger scale. In order

to combat low enrollment of African American students in AP courses, Davis, Davis, and Mobley (2013) sought to create an intervention program that was focused on placing students in a small group that would receive focused support through a two-week summer program and weekly counseling support. The goal of the program was to develop the students' individual identities as scholars and to create and sustain an achievement-focused cohort of African American male students. At the end of the course, African American students who participated in the program receiving support had their AP psychology exam scores compared to White students within the school. The mean score for African American students in the program was 4.08, compared to 4.19 for White students. African American students in the program who did not receive support scored a 3.0. The study showed that African American students could be successful as long as they received the proper support from educators and counselors.

Klopfenstein (2004) stated that mentors are particularly important for Hispanic and African American students who might not have an adult at home who is involved educationally. She noted that those mentors should be AP teachers who look like their students, if possible, to serve as positive role models. Gill (2014), Superintendent of the Antioch Unified School District in California, formed the African American Male Initiative, which meets biweekly in the evenings to accommodate the schedules of many parents within the district. The program sets out to ensure that African American males are successful within the district by providing volunteer services that ensure that African American males are identified for gifted and talented programs, as well as special education programs. The Antioch Unified School District also utilized restorative justice practices that ensure that African American males are not suspended for reasons that could originate from racial bias.

Beitler and Bushong (2013) work at Wakefield High School in Arlington, VA, and work

with Black and Latino males in the Wakefield cohort. The Wakefield cohort program came about when the school realized that less than 3% of the Black and Latino male population was enrolling for AP courses. The program sought to identify freshmen Black and Latino males who could be successful with a more rigorous curriculum such as the Advanced Placement program. In this program, educators meet the academic and social-emotional needs of each of their students through weekly group meetings. By challenging this population of Wakefield High School students, they saw an over 200% increase in the number of Black and Latino males who enrolled in AP courses. The Wakefield cohort is now over 15 years old and has seen over 85% of their students go on to attend a two- or four-year college or additional professional training.

These initiatives show that African American males can succeed when placed in environments that are conducive to success. When educators systematically adjust policy and practices to include the voices of African American males, equity within the educational system can be realized. But if some educators continue with the same oppressive policies and practices, large populations of African American males will never reach their true potential.

Summary

African American males in the United States face numerous barriers when navigating the public education networks. These barriers are even more pronounced when African American males try to get into the advanced academic programs across our nation. The College Board, the parent company of Advanced Placement, has communicated with the nation that there is a need to improve equity within the Advanced Placement program. This starts with the way that African American males are identified for advanced academic programs as early as elementary grades. The gap only increases as the years pass and African American males attempt to enroll in Advanced Placement courses.

Moving forward, this study attempts to bring light to what is keeping many African American males from enrolling in Advanced Placement courses. This is accomplished by using a qualitative approach to analyze data that are compiled through open-ended interviews and an analysis of district policies. A framework of how to enroll African American males in Advanced Placement classes, maintain their enrollment, and increase AP exam scores could come from this study. Hughes and Bonner (2006) stated, "Current research would have many of us believe that Black males are pathological and failing miserably in our nation's schools, when in actuality our nation's schools seem to be the purveyors of pathology and are miserably failing Black males" (p. 77). This study is greatly needed in a society in which the perception of African American males is negative and that continues to move in a harmful direction for our nation. Chapter 3 details the methodology and research design used to propel this study to create equity in advanced academic courses for African American males.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how and in what ways district and school leaders created or hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. To accomplish this purpose, I looked at current policies and practices at the district, school, and classroom levels that ensured and/or hindered the rights of African American males to both gain access to and receive an equitable educational experience in advanced academic programs. The end goal and intent of this study was to inform district-level leaders across the nation of best practices that might be beneficial in increasing the enrollment of African American males in advanced academic programs, thus increasing their academic outcomes. The overarching question that was used to guide this study was as followed: How do district and school policies and practices create equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males? The following sub-questions assisted in answering the overarching research question:

A. How and in what ways do district and school leaders create or hinder equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males?

B. What conditions have supported or hindered African American males in their ability to enroll and succeed in advanced academic courses?

In this chapter, I expound on the research design by providing background information on qualitative research as a research method, a rationale for the research design, and an overview of the data sources. Next, I provide a description of the sampling procedure, research participants, data collection devices, and data collection procedures, including the strategies that were utilized to analyze the data and develop the research findings. Finally, I present the limitations and ethical considerations relevant to this study.

Qualitative Research Design

To explore district and school policies and practices that created equitable opportunities

for African American males in advanced academic programs, a qualitative exploratory case

study research design was utilized. The main aim of case study is to understand, in a meaningful

and nuanced way, the view of those who are involved within the case (Stake, 2005). Yin (2009)

stated that a case study was research that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and

within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are

not clearly evident" (p. 19). By examining the phenomenon, the success, or lack thereof, of

African American males may be attributed to policies and behaviors of leadership and the

factors, such as enrollment, that were linked to African American male attitudes toward

advanced academics, and academic outcomes. Qualitatively-driven approaches to case study

research deploy a broad range of theoretical perspectives that privileged getting at a range of

social justice issues and processes whose goal entailed deep understanding of the complexity of

lived experiences and social processes (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Since understanding is the primary goal, in qualitative research the researcher is the

primary instrument for data collection and data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). In a

qualitatively driven case study, the researcher garners rich detailed descriptions of human life

rooted in a rich social context (Hesse-Biber, 2017). By immersing myself deeply in the

phenomenon, I hoped to gain an understanding of the policies and practices that affected the

opportunities given to African American males through the perspective of administrators and,

most importantly, African American males themselves. This case study design explored district

and school policies and practices that could improve academic outcomes for African American

males across the country. The goal was to gain deep insights, to discover and even to test out a range of emerging hunches and theoretical insights (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

The research study was implemented through three phases. Phase I included the recruitment of participants. These individuals included African American male students who had taken at least one Advanced Placement course, as well as the Riverfalls High School (RHS) (pseudonym) principal, campus Advanced Placement coordinator, Advanced Placement teachers, and the district advanced academics coordinator. Phase II involved data collection through interaction with students, district/campus leadership, along with classroom teachers. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with key district leaders and classroom teachers as well as a focus group interview with African American male students were conducted; in addition, district/campus policies regarding advanced academics were analyzed. Phase III required an analysis of participant responses using a priori and open coding, analysis of district/campus policy documents, validation of transcribed information through member checking, and identification of emerging themes from participant responses. Figure 2 describes the phases of research and data collection used for this qualitative case study.
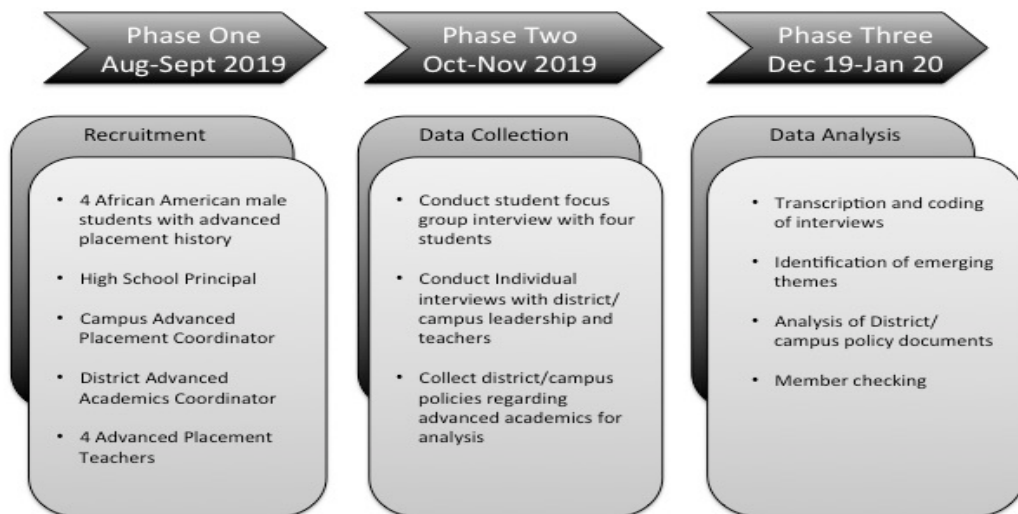
Figure 2. Visual of the phases of the research design, including recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.

Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used in order to select participants for this study. The logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bloomberg & Vorpe, 2018).   This was in contrast to random sampling procedures, which characterized quantitative research. Random sampling controls for selection bias and allows generalization of the sample to the larger population. Using a purposeful sampling technique allowed me to select key participants that were best suited to provide input to answer the research questions. Although some of the information being gathered from the educational site included descriptive data, such as demographic breakdown, it was imperative that I got the lived experiences of those who were affected the most. This meant that I needed to collect data from specific district leaders, the campus principal, campus teachers, and most importantly, the African American male students themselves.

For staff selection, I interviewed the district advanced academics coordinator, the building principal, the campus Advanced Placement coordinator, and teachers at the educational site that played a role in decision-making efforts regarding enrollment, student recruitment, and ensuring that African American males continued on the Advanced Placement track. African American males taking part in the focus group interview recommended teachers who should be invited to participate in the study. I also interviewed the campus AP coordinator since that person was an integral part of the efforts detailed above. These key individuals were the gatekeepers to access within the district and educational site for African American males. Choosing these individuals ensured that I was getting information from the educational leaders at the district, campus, and classroom leadership levels that had the most influence on the

educational outcomes of African American males who were part of the Advanced Placement program at the educational site.

For student selection, all African American males at Riverfalls High School who were enrolled in at least one AP course, or had been enrolled at some point in their educational experience, were invited to participate in the study. This ensured that I was able to select participants from the largest pool of qualified African American male students. From those students who responded affirmatively, 4 African American males were selected to take part in the student focus group. Because this study attempted to get to the root of what was needed to create equity for African American males in advanced academic studies, it was imperative to get the voice of African American males and their lived experiences within the Advanced Placement program at the educational site. Their voice was vital in finding out if policies and practices that were put in place by district and campus leaders were working in advancing the educational outcomes of African American males.

In order to ensure the confidentiality of those taking part in the study, each participant was given a pseudonym. Throughout the findings, each participant was referred to by his or her pseudonym. Table 1 and Table 2 provides information on those that participated in the study, their gender, years of experience or classification, position within the school district, their current location, along with the type of interview that the participant took part in. Of the African American males who took part in the study, one was classified as a junior and three were classified as seniors at the educational site. The average years of experience for educators participating in the study was twenty-two years while the most junior participant had seven years in education and the most senior participant had forty years of experience in education.

Table 1

Information Related to Participants of the Study

Pseudonym	Gender	Experience	Position	Location	Type
Mr. Thomas	Male	7 years	Teacher	Campus	Interview
Mrs. Sims	Female	9 years	Teacher	Campus	Interview
Mrs. Gibbs	Female	22 years	Teacher	Campus	Interview
Mrs. Sheer	Female	31 years	Teacher	Campus	Interview
Mrs. Cobb	Female	40 years	AP Coord	Campus	Interview
Mr. James	Male	28 years	Principal	Campus	Interview
Mrs. George	Female	17 years	Administrator	Central Office	Interview

Table 2

Information Related to Students of the Study

Pseudonym	Gender	Grade Level	Position	Type
Chris	Male	Junior	Student	Focus Group
Mark	Male	Senior	Student	Focus Group
Sam	Male	Senior	Student	Focus Group
William	Male	Senior	Student	Focus Group

Collectively, the educators that participated in the study had instructional and administrative experience, totaling over 154 years in public education, which spanned all levels of elementary and secondary education. Each participant within the study brought his/her own unique perspective, but there was a clear overlap in the responses that led to the emergence of themes in the findings. The findings illuminated connections between the categories and the tenets of critical social theory, which led to the themes of the advanced academic equity model.

Site Selection

The selection of the educational site was purposive in nature to identify an educational site that would give me a better understanding of the research problem stated from the onset. To locate an appropriate site, I consulted the College Board's 9th Annual AP District Honor Roll (College Board, 2018), which highlighted school districts that had committed themselves to increasing access to Advanced Placement coursework for underrepresented students while also maintaining or increasing the percentage of students earning AP Exam scores of 3 or higher. According to the College Board, in 2018, only 373 school districts were chosen in the United States and Canada. Only 30 Texas school districts earned the honor of being included in the College Board's 9th Annual AP District Honor Roll. Of the 30 Texas districts, 11 were in the North Texas area. The regional breakdown of all national districts can be found in Table 3, as well as that of Texas.

Table 3

College Board Honor Roll by Region and Texas

Districts	West	Midwest	South	Northeast	Texas
Total Districts in Region	46	113	58	146	30
30% > Minority Enrollment	16	7	20	10	14
30% > Qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch	11	6	13	11	8
Met Both Criteria	11	4	12	6	8

I contacted Riverfalls ISD not only because the district was included in the College Board's 9th Annual AP District Honor Roll but also because the district served a high number of historically marginalized students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, along with a high number of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch. The population of this district better served the purpose of the study, which was to explore district and school policies and

practices that created equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. Because of the diversity of the campus, I felt that Riverfalls High School was an ideal setting to conduct the case study. I then sought approval from district leaders, the campus principal, and educators employed at the educational site to participate in the case study.

In the 2017-2018 academic school year, Riverfalls High enrolled 2,527 students with a race/ethnicity breakdown as follows: Hispanic 29.4%, African American 21.9%, White 30.4%, Asian 10.4%, Two or More Races 4.1%, American Indian 0.6%, and Pacific Islander 3.2% while 48% of the campus was economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Riverfalls H.S. had consistently been ranked as a top high school in Texas for its diversity. The student population information for the district and site is included in Table 4.

Table 4

District and School Demographic Information

	Enrollment	Low SES	Hispanic	African American	White	Asian
District	23,364	52.6%	30.1%	19.2%	35.2%	7.4%
RHS	2,527	47.8%	29.4%	21.9%	30.4%	10.4%

Data Collection

Three methods of data collection were employed: (1) focus group interview, (2) individual interviews, and (3) document and textual analysis. Methods for gathering data are selected to fit the style of inquiry preferred and to fit the research questions (Stake, 2010).

Focus Group Interviews

A focus group interview discussion was conducted with African American male students who were, or had been, enrolled in advanced academic courses. Focus groups, or group

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interviews, are facilitated by group discussions and possess elements of both participant

observation and individual interviews while also maintaining their own uniqueness as a

distinctive research method (Kreuger & Casey, 2015; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). One group

of four African American male students was formed to conduct the semi-structured interview.

The focus group interview process helped me gain insight into the lived experiences of African

American males taking part in the Advanced Placement program at the educational site. One

strength of focus groups was that they were socially oriented, and they provided an opportunity

to study participants in an atmosphere that was often more natural and relaxed than a one-on-one

interview (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). As stated before, the focus group interview protocol

(Appendix B) was semi-structured in nature. This allowed participants to relate their experiences

of the Advanced Placement program to others within the educational site. To maintain

confidentiality, each African American male was given a number that they stated each time that

they wanted to answer a question. I facilitated the focus group interview, while observing

participant interactions, actively listening and taking notes.

Semi-Structured Face-to-Face Interviews

Semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews were held with district/school leaders

as well as classroom teachers. Semi-structured interviews are used to facilitate more focused

exploration of a specific topic, using an interview guide (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Interview

questions for both the individual administrator interview protocol (Appendix A) and teacher

interview protocol (Appendix C) were aligned with the research questions guiding this study. By

using a semi-structured format, individual participants are given some latitude and freedom to

talk about what is important or of interest to them (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Through these semi-

structured individual interviews, I expected to gain a better understanding of what and/or how

certain policies and practices ensured and/or hindered the rights of African American males to enroll in advanced academics courses. All interview protocols were field tested to ensure that the questions adequately yielded data to answer the research questions being presented in the study.

Document Collection

Selected documents related to the advanced academic program within the school district were gathered for analysis during phase two of the data collection cycle. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), researchers often supplement observation and interviewing with gathering and analyzing documents. Documents that were gathered included campus documents related to Advanced Placement requirements, recruitment information, grading policies, and Advanced Placement prerequisites.

Data Collection Procedures

To explore district and school policies and practices that created equitable opportunities for African American males in advanced academic programs, data was collected using individual face-to-face interviews and a focus group interview. Qualitative interviews involved semi-structured and often open-ended questions that were intended to elicit the views and opinions of the participants (Creswell, 2014). According to Stake (2010), it takes a really good interview question for most interviewees to get deeply into what is being studied.

The student focus group interview and school administrator face-to-face interviews took place at Riverfalls High School in a location and at a time that was convenient for the participants. District-level administrator interviews took place at the administration building, in their respective offices, at a time that was convenient for each administrator. Each of these interviews took approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. Before participants could be

interviewed, informed consent documents were completed. These forms detailed how participation in the study would be confidential, would not cause harm, and that participants may end their participation at any time that they felt uncomfortable. I reviewed the informed consent form with participants before starting the interview. With participant permission, digital recorders were used to record the interviews. Professional transcription services by TranscribeMe! provided a highly accurate transcription of each interview that was used for data analysis and was shared, as needed, with each participant for member checking. I also took field notes in order to track markers during the interviews. According to Hesse-Biber (2017), markers are important pieces of information that a participant may offer as they are talking about something else. The use of a semi-structured interview protocol enabled me to maintain consistency between interviews but also allowed for room to explore themes that the interviewee felt were important or of interest (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Brinkmann, 2018).

District and campus documents were also reviewed to provide another layer to the qualitative study. Documents offer a valuable resource for confirming insights gained through other methods of data collection (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Documents that were analyzed in this study include reports from the Public Education Information Management System, district communication documents regarding advanced academics such as the Advanced Placement contract, and information sent home to parents regarding advanced academics. By triangulating the data through multiple data-gathering techniques such as individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document review, the reliability of the study was enhanced, and a more complex understanding of the phenomena was gained.

<div align="center">Data Analysis Process</div>

In order to preserve the integrity throughout the study, data collection and analysis

occurred simultaneously. The data management and data analysis phases of this study followed Creswell's (2014) six-step process.

The first step required organization and preparation of the data. This initial step involved transcribing interviews, optically scanning material, typing up field notes, cataloguing all of the visual material, and sorting and arranging the data into different types, depending on the sources of information. Step two involved reading and looking at all of the data. This step allowed me to gain a general sense of the information and gave me the opportunity to reflect on its overall meaning and general ideas obtained from the data. During step three, I started coding all of the data. I took the text data gathered throughout the study, segmented sentences into categories, and labeled each category with a term. In some cases, the category or term would be derived from the actual language of the participant, called an *in vivo* term. Step four entailed using the coding process. During this step, I generated a description of the setting as well as categories or themes for analysis. In step five, I composed a narrative description. During this step, I went into greater detail regarding how the description and themes were represented in the narrative format. Finally, in step six, I made interpretations. During this last step, I articulated what I saw in the data. In addition, I made generalizations about the data in regard to my research questions by examining what I had learned, analyzing new data, and developing additional questions for further research.

Data analysis for this study began with the initial steps of the data collection phase outlined above. This included facilitating a focus group interview with African American males within the Advanced Placement program, conducting individual face-to-face interviews with key educational figures that were part of the Advanced Placement program, and reviewing key artifacts that pertained to the Advanced Placement program. I used an open coding system by

pulling from the words of the interviews to assign codes to the different segments of the data (Bloomberg & Vorpe, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017). These codes were then placed together by likeness and the number of times that they were evoked. This process resulted in the emergence of 25 categories spanning across the four tenets of critical social theory. Themes that were found to be smaller in significance were not considered for reporting in this study. Table 5 lists the four tenets of critical social theory, the related emergent categories, aligned to the themes of the conceptual framework.

Table 5

Emergent Categories by Critical Social Theory Themes

Theoretical Framework Tenets	Emergent Categories	Advanced Academic Equity Model
False Consciousness	Purpose of Advanced Placement HS AP Programming Issues Academic Characteristics Needed for AP Academic Foundation High School Mindset Curriculum Shortcomings Teacher Training Matters	"Cultivating the Advanced Placement Program"
Crisis	Focus on Testing Educational Tracking Factors Contributing to AP Bailout Educational Gatekeeping Contributing Factors to (Mis)Identification	"Identifying Academic Shortcomings"
Education	Student Support Systems Needed Village Mentality Need for Cultural Proficiency Finding Opportunities for Success District/Campus Communication Finding the Hidden Gems Need for Early Identification Filling the Math Gap	"Supporting the Needs of Students"
Transformative Action	Missing Black Males Stereotypes Associated with Black Males The Black Male Identity African American Male Retention Woes Parental Engagement	"Addressing Invisible African American Males"

As previously stated, at the beginning of the coding process, I reviewed all data for possible trends or patterns. From this initial look, I noticed several major categories across the data. Emergent categories with similar meaning were combined and organized according to the respective major tenet of critical social theory: (a) false consciousness - purpose of Advanced Placement, high school Advanced Placement programming issues, academic characteristics needed for Advanced Placement, academic foundation, high school mindset, curriculum shortcomings, teacher training matters; (b) crisis - focus on testing, educational tracking, factors contributing to Advanced Placement bailout, educational gatekeeping, contributing factors to (Mis)identification; (c) education - student support systems needed, village mentality, need for cultural proficiency, finding opportunities for success, district/campus communication, finding the hidden gems, need for early identification, filling the math gap; and (d) transformative action - missing Black males, stereotypes associated with Black males, the Black male identity, African American male retention woes, parental engagement.

The tenets and categories were then compared for consistency within the topic and to identify outliers within the data set. Categories with a low frequency count of less than five were seen as insignificant for this study and were not included in the findings. Table 5 indicated that the tenets of false consciousness and education were more dominant in the findings than the tenets of crisis and transformative action.

<center>Positionality</center>

Because I am the primary instrument within the study, it was imperative that I conducted all aspects of this research study ethically by remaining transparent throughout the process of data collection and analysis and acknowledging the potential for bias. All researchers, people, and reports have biases, but most researchers work hard to recognize and/or address biases

(Stake, 2010). Therefore, it was imperative that I stated from the beginning that I am currently an administrator in the school district, but not at the educational site that served as the research site where this case study took place.

As an African American male who matriculated through public education, my biases toward the public education system must be checked from the beginning. Numerous shortcomings along the way that shaped my views on public education included very little counseling in course selection, very little guidance for college preparation or financial aid, and teachers who set low expectations for me that ultimately allowed me to progress through my entire freshman year without earning a single high school credit in a core course. These experiences left me apprehensive about whether public education in the United States was providing the necessary supports for African American males to succeed.

My status as an insider provided me with an optimal opportunity to obtain more authentic data related to how leaders at the district and campus level had created equitable opportunities for African American males in advanced academic programs and the actions they planned in making enrollment decisions for advanced academic programs. Insider status is developed from traits, experiences, or characteristics the researcher has in common with his or her research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). But it also meant that I must bracket myself from interpreting data that would influence the development of the study in a way that was not authentic. Bracketing is the process of being self-aware of your own values and experiences and taking precautionary measures to ensure that they do not influence the input of participants (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). Furthermore, as an insider, the African American males who participated in this study may be more willing to talk about their previous educational experiences and discuss why they chose, or chose not, to enroll in an advanced academic

program and address any barriers they believed may have hindered them, if applicable, from succeeding in advanced academic courses.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of a study are the characteristics of design or methodology that influence or impact the interpretation of the findings from the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). One of the main limitations of this study was the limited sample size and use of the purposive sampling method. Because of this limitation, the findings cannot be generalized for all African American males within the public education setting. However, the findings from the study may inform district and school leaders of what corrective action needs to take place moving forward.

Another limitation dealt with the interviewee responses to the interviewer. Because some of the African American males possibly knew me from having attended the junior high school where I was an administrator, they could be providing responses to the questions based on what they thought I wanted to hear. Because of participant reactivity, I had to ensure that I was bracketing any potential influence on the participant responses.

Ethical Considerations

Before any data was collected at the educational site, the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the application for the qualitative case study. The IRB committee required the researcher to assess the potential for risk to participants in a study, such as physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal harm (Sieber, 1998). All adult participants were asked to give consent before they were interviewed for this study. Because most of the students who took part in the student focus group were part of a vulnerable population as minors, all students were required to obtain consent from parents in addition to signing their own letters

of consent. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and great care was taken to ensure that the identity of the participants was not compromised at any point during the study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how and in what ways district and school policies and practices created or hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. To address the purpose of the study and answer the research questions, a qualitative case study research design was deemed to be the most appropriate vehicle through the use of a focus group interview, face-to-face interviews, and document analysis. Through data analysis, I identified emergent categories and themes that answered the research questions. Chapter 4 provides the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore how and in what ways district and school leaders created or hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. The primary function of advanced academic programs within the public education system is to prepare students for the rigors of post-secondary education (Klopfenstein, 2004; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). To accomplish the purpose of this study, I explored perceptions, practices, and supports utilized by teachers, campus administrators, and district administrators from the Advanced Placement program within one diverse, high-performing high school campus.

This chapter includes the findings from the qualitative exploratory case study. The questions contained in the individual face-to-face interview protocol centered around the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S., how district and campus leadership were providing supports for retaining and recruiting African American males, and how the district assessed the effectiveness of the Advanced Placement program. Student focus group interview protocols centered on the lived experiences of African American males within the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S. which included recruitment, preparedness for Advanced Placement work, and relevancy of course curriculum to the cultural backgrounds of African American males. Data collection was comprised of individual face-to-face interviews with educators, a focus group interview with African American male students, along with select district artifacts that support the Advanced Placement program implemented at the educational site. The following overarching question and two sub-questions guided the research: How do

district and school policies and practices create equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males?

A. How and in what ways do district and school leaders create or hinder equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males?

B. What conditions have supported or hindered African American males in their ability to enroll and succeed in advanced academic courses?

Data presented is in support of the four tenets of critical social theory (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010), which were false consciousness, crisis, education, and transformative action. It was hoped that specific insights from the data would expand on the advanced academic equity model framework. The emergent themes were: cultivating the Advanced Placement program, identifying academic shortcomings, supporting the needs of students, and addressing invisible African American males. Findings for each theme are organized by the tenets of critical social theory and the supporting categories found under each theme.

Context

Upon entering Riverfalls H.S., I found the staff and administration to be welcoming. I was concerned to begin the study relative to my familiarity with Riverfalls H.S.; however, I found my knowledge of the school and the staff to be surface level at best. This gave me the opportunity to get a true understanding of the Advanced Placement program and the participants. I sensed participants to be truthful when answering questions. Because I was holding interviews after school so as not to interrupt the instructional time of students and teachers, finding participants for the study was difficult, especially students. If I had interviewed participants during school hours, gaining participants would have been easier. It was also challenging to eliminate the teachers who taught International Baccalaureate (IB) since most teachers taught in both the IB and Advanced Placement programs. The principal and his front office staff were

more than willing to provide rooms for me to complete my study. Overall, from the district level

all the way down to the campus level, the staff was curious about the study and how their input

could impact educational outcomes for African American males. I now turn to the findings of

the study, which is organized by the tenets of critical social theory.

Findings by Theme

Through the lens of critical social theory, educators and students attempted to illuminate

policies and practices that created, or hindered, African American male educational

opportunities. The presentation of the findings highlight the four tenets of the theoretical

framework and categories that presented in the four emergent themes: cultivating the Advanced

Placement program, identifying academic shortcomings, supporting the needs of students, and

addressing invisible African American males. The emergent themes are supported through data

found in district artifacts such as the Advanced Placement contract, interviews, and focus group

discussions. Each of the themes aligned to one of four tenets of critical social theory (Freeman

& Vasconcelos, 2010). The following presents the emergent categories by theoretical tenet that

participants believed had the strongest impact on creating equitable advanced academic program

opportunities for African American males at the educational site.

False Consciousness

Fay (1987) defined false consciousness as the internalization of values, beliefs, and

worldviews of the oppressors by the oppressed and their ability to willingly cooperate with those

who oppress them in maintaining the social practices that end in their oppression. For this study,

I interpreted false consciousness as the effect of the values and beliefs of educators, and even

College Board, on the educational outcomes of African American males within Riverfalls H.S.

When participants talked about their beliefs in order for students to be successful in the

Advanced Placement program, these ideas were clustered together under false consciousness. African American male students within the study echoed how they had to rise to the expectation and internalize these characteristics (work ethic, time management, etc.) that educators deemed as necessary in order to be successful in the program. The major categories included in false consciousness were purpose of the Advanced Placement program, high school Advanced Placement programming issues, academic characteristics needed for Advanced Placement, academic foundation, high school mindset, curriculum shortcomings, and teacher training matters. The following are my findings for false consciousness, beginning with the purpose of the Advanced Placement program.

Purpose of Advanced Placement

When viewed through the lens of false consciousness, the purpose of the Advanced Placement program illuminated a need to fit into a mold that was defined by the College Board in order to gain college credit hours through Advanced Placement tests. Numerous participants pointed out the fact that the Advanced Placement program challenged the students through higher rigor and standards compared to on-level classes. These classes were meant to provide students with their first exposure to college-level content. If students were not able to meet this level of rigor, they were either provided the support to succeed or forced back down to on-level classes. During her individual face-to-face interview, Mrs. Sims, a teacher at Riverfalls High School, captured this belief in the following statement:

> Advanced Placement classes are designed for students who want to challenge themselves academically because the rigor is so high. These kids might be bored in an on-level class and so this is preparing them skill-wise more than anything, more than content, I think, for college.

Students who chose to rise to the challenge of Advanced Placement can possibly earn college credit at the end of the journey through examination. Every educator participating in the

study noted that the end goal was to gain college credits. Because students earned credit for

courses by examination, these credits not only saved students time but also lowered the cost of

post-secondary educational expenses. Mrs. Sheer, a teacher at Riverfalls High School, shared:

> The purpose of the Advanced Placement program is to help students get college credit
> while they are still in high school in a setting where they know the professor or teacher.
> Students can maybe understand the course better here in high school and so they have a
> really great chance not only to get that credit but also gain a solid background to help
> them in many of their courses moving forward.

All participants acknowledged that the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls High

School prepared students for the academic demands that awaited students when they entered

college. But they also highlighted a number of issues with the Advanced Placement program

that is discussed in the following section.

High School Advanced Placement Programming Issues

After talking with educators within the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S.,

it was quickly made apparent that one of the major issues was that the demographics were not

representative of the general school population. I identified this as a crisis that had been

internally manufactured. This created an environment that seemed unwelcoming to student

populations with less representation. Numerous participants, such as Mrs. Sheer and Mrs. Gibbs,

stated that Riverfalls H.S. is a 30/30/30/10 campus when it comes to demographics, yet the

demographics within the Advanced Placement program do not reflect that same level of

representation. Mrs. Gibbs stated:

> When I first started Advanced Placement, it would have been 80% white and then we
> have the sprinkling here. But now it is kind of like a sprinkle of everything. But when
> you are looking at it, I mean there is maybe one or two African American students per
> class.

Mrs. Sheer added:

> Advanced Placement is pretty diverse, I am happy to say, but not necessarily in African

American males. So right now, I would say just African Americans in general, I have got two females, and just one male, whom I lost today. And that might be typical.

Although the Advanced Placement program may not be a direct mirror of the general population, it was considered representative of the diversity that populated the halls of Riverfalls H.S. Diversity was celebrated at Riverfalls H.S. rather than being something to hide. You saw it when you walked through the halls and saw the flags representing the different countries that students came from. African American participants talked about the fact that even though they were not really represented well within the Advanced Placement program, their circle of peers was rather diverse, providing a false sense of belonging. The exploitation of the diversity at Riverfalls H.S. was used to mask the fact that African American males were isolated through academic firewalls from other African American males who could potentially benefit from being part of the Advanced Placement program. Mrs. Sheer talked about diversity at Riverfalls H.S.:

> I think an advantage at Riverfalls is we really value our diversity, and it is very common to have groups of friends that are very ethnically diverse. That is common. Everybody thinks everyone else's culture is cool. So that is an advantage to say maybe another school that is not as proud of their diversity.

One area that numerous teachers talked about was the scheduling conflict between the Advanced Placement program and the International Baccalaureate program. This left students at a disadvantage because teachers served in roles for both programs, which limited opportunities for students to take courses. At Riverfalls H.S., the perception was that International Baccalaureate was more important than Advanced Placement, whether it was with resources, teachers, course offerings, or the push for students to enter IB their junior year. Mrs. Cobb highlighted this inequity.

> Having the IB program here presents a little bit of a problem because there are some conflicts in scheduling. Some classes we have up here are co-seated where there is IB and AP at the same time. And a lot of times, kids will find that they have conflicts. Like they cannot take AP physics because it is only offered this period and there is something

else that is only offered this period that they need to take. And so that has been a continual process that we have been working on here at Riverfalls. Because I think that the scheduling situation really provides the biggest problem.

The lack of a push toward Advanced Placement such as the one for International Baccalaureate along with the lack of a push to keep students in Advanced Placement were concerns that participants felt needed to be addressed. The problem not only affected African American males but affected the entire population of students taking part in the Advanced Placement program. Although due to small numbers of African American males within the Advanced Placement program, a programming issue could possibly eliminate their voice from the class completely.

Academic Characteristics Needed for Advanced Placement

Throughout the data collection phase, educators echoed the same ideas about what characteristics should be visible in students in order for them to succeed in Advanced Placement classes. Because educators have collectively deemed certain characteristics necessary in order for students to succeed in the Advanced Placement program, I have defined this as another example of false consciousness. These characteristics included work ethic, a sense of accountability, time/workload management, testing skills, and the ability to multitask. On the importance of work ethic over student aptitude, Mrs. Sheer said:

> Work ethic is a huge one. I mean, you do not have to be the sharpest knife in the drawer. If you are willing to work hard and say why did I miss that instead of I missed that, and you were willing to work at it, that is bigger than aptitude.

When asked what accountability looks like for her, Mrs. Sims stated:

> I am all about them being 50/50 with me. Yes, you can turn your work in late, but on the next thing, if you turn it in late, I am not taking it. You have to be accountable. You have to do your stuff. You have to give me effort, and I will give effort directly to you.

Mr. Thomas talked about the need of African American males to be able to manage their time with the demands of extracurricular activities weighing on them in the Fall semester by saying, "So a lot of the African American students, they are football players. So if they are going to be successful, they have to manage their time." Mrs. Sheer added to this thought by saying, "If you are in something that takes time [extracurricular], these students tend to know how to manage their time. Let's say I have two hours. I better make great use of those two hours."

Because students have to take a test in order to earn college credit, it was imperative that students had the necessary test taking skills needed in order to be successful. According to Mrs. Gibbs, these traits are not visible in all students. She stated:

> So maybe half the kids can get the credit because they have that background already and they have good testing skills. You can test or you cannot and you can write or you cannot, that kind of deal.

Mrs. Sims summed up the need to be able to have multiple characteristics.

> It is just what you have to go through in order to get to the test score. It is time management, it is discipline, it is kind of how do I deal with my emotions when I am tired and how do I do all my stuff and just kind of preparing them for being just crazy busy all of the time.

Academic Foundation

One concern that multiple educators had about students taking the Advanced Placement track was a lack of foundational skills once they got to Riverfalls H.S. Academic foundation was defined as students progressing through the appropriate advanced academic track starting in elementary school, through junior high, and extending into high school. In relation to false consciousness, students who did not complete the necessary track dictated by the district would not be able to enroll in the appropriate Advanced Placement course once at Riverfalls H.S. It was imperative that African American males started the Advanced Placement track early on,

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rather than later, due to academic demands placed on students. Mrs. George, an administrator

within the district, talked about the need to get on the advanced academic track in junior high

school:

> So, if you are a pretty good student, you make Bs, you want to work hard, and you are
> ready to try something maybe that stretches you, go into Pre-AP. It will never be easier
> to get into Pre-AP than in seventh grade because after that, you are going to be lacking
> some foundational skills.

It was possible for students to enter the advanced academic track at a later point of their

academic career but this did not happen often due to the gaps in knowledge. Mrs. Cobb, the

Advanced Placement coordinator at RHS said:

> I have seen some kids that have tried to track up. That does not happen very often. And
> those kids that try to move on to Advanced Placement are usually not real successful
> because they just have not been accustomed to the rigor and all the stuff that they have to
> do. So they are just not very successful.

Numerous participants echoed this sentiment by saying that students lacked the

background necessary to be successful or lack prerequisite knowledge in order to be successful

within the Advanced Placement program. Students who lacked the academic foundation needed

for Advanced Placement likely lacked the high school mindset, which is discussed in the next

section.

High School Mindset

The high school mindset is defined as the expectation that students will be ready for the

rigors of the Advanced Placement program by the time students reached Riverfalls H.S. This

was related to false consciousness because teacher expectations were pressed upon students

before they entered the halls of Riverfalls H.S. As stated in the literature review, it was never the

intent of the oppressors to acculturate Africans into the mainstream American culture, which

included the educational system (Lopez, 2003; Nash, 2006). Students either rose to this

unfamiliar expectation or found themselves facing possible removal from the Advanced

Placement program. Although students entered Riverfalls H.S. with some form of advanced

academic experience, Mrs. Cobb discussed how their Advanced Placement program could be

bigger if students knew what the expectation was before getting to high school.

> If there was better communication between junior high and high school, I think we would have more kids, and we would be more successful up here. Because they already know what the expectation is.

William, an African American male, during the focus group interview, stated how he was

welcomed into his first Advanced Placement class:

> Once you walk in class, and the teachers like, I expect you to do this and that and that and that, even though it was my first time in the Advanced Placement class. So it was pretty difficult at first, since the teacher was expecting me to already be associated with AP stuff. Even though it was my first time.

All of the student participants expressed, at some point in their academic career, this idea

that the teachers expected them to already have a mindset for Advanced Placement without really

building them up. Mr. Thomas, a teacher at Riverfalls H.S., expressed the importance of making

the interaction about expectations personal for the student.

> I guess it depends on their early interaction with, I do not know if it is either their teachers or their counselors, regarding the expectations and future. But I think making that message personal to them is more important than just telling them that oh, it is going to be harder. So, I guess it is person-by-person and it has to be individually based. Otherwise, I do not think that message goes very far, particularly with a group of teenagers and kids.

Students taking part in the focus group interview expressed a need for educators to see

them for whom they were rather than expecting them to come into the Advanced Placement

program with what educators had defined as the standard.

Curriculum Shortcomings

African American male students in the focus group discussion described a clear lack of a

cultural viewpoint. William said, "Most curriculums really do not focus much on the African American part of history." Sam went on to say, "I really do not see teachers putting my cultural significance into play. They just teach. They teach everyone, good or bad." These sentiments highlighted an issue that came with a curriculum that was based on a test. Mr. Thomas talked about how the focus for the course was selected by saying, "How we find our focus for the class is based off of the trends that we see in College Board's testing." This caused students like Chris to question the authenticity of the coursework. He stated:

> When they be talking about slavery, like when they talk about African culture, I do not know if they really talking about it. I know in some schools they have like a real African History class. But here, we only learning about a segment. And it might not even be real truth.

Sam went on to talk about the euro-centric view of the course by saying, "I never really thought of how much it indulged in just Europe and that it does not take other cultures into play. I just think that it is something I have to know, then do on an AP test." Mrs. Sims believed that teachers were not able to go in-depth with their subject due to the length of the semester. At Riverfalls H.S., courses were taught in trimesters versus semesters. This meant that a course was taught in twelve-weeks rather than eighteen weeks. She talked about this a little more by saying:

> I am definitely sure, content-wise, that I do not get to go into stuff as much as I would like to. We are also cut off because people usually take all year. Our kids take it in two trimesters. But we are able to get a lot more out of them and do a lot more in the class. I mean, we get the high points. They do not use a traditional textbook; they are assigned a review book.

Although participants talked about how they were not able to go into great detail with the curriculum due to time constraints, they highlighted the fact that their scores beat neighboring districts that had more time on the content.

Teacher Training Matters

There were two main vehicles for training teachers for Advanced Placement at Riverfalls

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H.S. Those two means were through the Advanced Placement Summer Institute and through district professional development days. Mrs. George stated that APSI was the College Board's official AP training. She also said that the district paid for teachers to attend the conference and that she tried to send teachers every three years for a refresher. Although if a teacher taught a new course, they had to be trained right away. One of the benefits of APSI was that teachers were able to choose what sessions that they wanted to attend based on the needs of their students. When asked about APSI, Mr. Thomas said:

> With Advanced Placement, they have APSI. They have any of the normal things for advancing your knowledge. You can go to readings and things like that. But as far as the district view, it's more about your personal initiative regarding what you want to do as far as what your further studies are going to be for your professional development.

Although the district paid for teachers to attend these trainings, Mrs. Gibbs stated that maybe half of the teachers in her department regularly attended. When it came to filling in the professional development gap, she said:

> I try the best I can. That's why I do all the lesson plans. I'm like, okay, this is why we're having this on here. And this is the new rubric, and try to step them through, and talk about why we're doing what because this is what it looks like. So it's more about my responsibility.

Mrs. Sheer talked about how she used her time as an AP reader to benefit her students. She went on to say:

> When I was an AP reader, then that was great professional development because we graded the tests and they were really clear about this gets credit, this doesn't. So I come back and say, you better do it this way. If you want credit, don't say this. That was fabulous training.

District professional development days were also a means of training teachers at Riverfalls H.S. Mrs. George stated that this year she was able to pull all the AP teachers to give them time to explore using the AP Central website. When talking about AP Central, she said, "It has unit plans and assessments. It's very comprehensive and very, very helpful. If you were a

new AP teacher, it would save your life." When talking about the benefit of using AP Central, Mrs. Gibbs said:

> You can look at it, the multiple choice and the essay, it color codes everything. The students marked in yellow are the ones that are definitely going to be struggling. So that's one thing, that we can identify them more and talk to them. Students in yellow might not be on the right path and need to come and talk to me to see what they are missing so that we can get them into the green.

Mrs. Sims also talked about how professional development days were flexed to incorporate time to write their qualifying test. She went on to say:

> They say we have AP training, but then, really, it ends up just being like a workday for us where they're like, you can make your test because we have to make our APQT and then just team meetings. So I feel like pretty much every time I've had an AP training posted by the district, it has just been work. I've only ever gotten focused training from College Board.

The majority of the teachers interviewed said that the training, whether through College Board or through the district, was not enough to prepare them for the demands of preparing students for advanced academics.

In closing the tenet of false consciousness, Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) believed that the values and beliefs of social members had become distorted and obscured by dominant ideology. This was confirmed by participants within the study who believed that in order for African American males to be successful in Advanced Placement programming at Riverfalls H.S., they must possess an academic background that started as early as elementary school. They must also conform to teacher-defined expectations for classes and possess a particular set of characteristics in order to have a chance at success. All of this was necessary, in addition to hoping that the students had the testing skills in order to get college credit at the end of the year. The data found under the tenet of false consciousness helped shape the advanced academic equity model theme of Cultivating the Advanced Placement Program. This theme identified

issues that were happening within the Advanced Placement program while outlining what academic characteristics were needed by African American males in order to succeed in the program.

Crisis

When looking at crises within the public education system, it is important to note that those crises that are first considered are likely to have been manufactured by systems of oppression (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). For this study, I have defined the tenet of crisis as those structures that were in place to impede the forward progress of African American males within the Riverfalls H.S Advanced Placement program. When participants discussed barriers for African American males at Riverfalls H.S. such as educational tracking, I clustered those problems under the tenet of crisis. The major categories included in crisis were focus on testing, educational tracking, factors contributing to Advanced Placement bailout, educational gatekeeping, and contributing factors to (mis)identification. The following are my findings, starting with focus on testing.

Focus on Testing

Although taking part in the Advanced Placement program prepared students for the rigor of college academics, it was ultimately the Advanced Placement tests that were the focus within the district. I identified focus on testing under the tenet of crisis due to College Board's emphasis on standardized testing which does not take into account the strengths of African American males. According to Mrs. Sims, there was always a constant push to beat the College Board global average for examinations. This had given the perception that the bottom line for the district was test scores. Mrs. Gibbs explained:

All I know is they want as many advanced academic students taking the AP test, and passing the test, as possible. That is what they want. So if you have 100 kids, they want you to try to get all 100 to take the test and get a three or higher. That is the expectation, which has never happened. As far as I know, they are just looking at the scores, just pure AP scores.

Program effectiveness was also tied to test scores. Participants talked about how at the end of the year there was an analysis of test scores in relationship to other districts and what improvement was needed in order to increase test scores. Mr. Thomas said:

We had a meeting, or we have a meeting, every year where they go over the statistics of how we fared regarding our scores. And they mostly just give us time talk as a group. All of the AP teachers will come together, and we will look at our statistics and we will look and see what our strengths were versus our weaknesses. And then we got to figure out how do we fix the problem.

Mrs. Cobb added:

When their scores come back, I mean, that is what they are really assessing and looking at. I think the teachers do a pretty good job of looking from year to year to see what areas do they need to shore up in their curriculum because the kids struggled with this or they did not understand that. And I think they do a good job of going back and showing that information to the kids and working on that with them.

Although the perception of numerous participants of this study was that AP test scores determined program effectiveness, they also noticed that there should be a balance of who took the test versus taking just the class. There should not be an expectation that every student should take the AP examination.

Educational Tracking

One of the concerns of educators and administrators within the district was that students who entered Riverfalls H.S. were already tracked for Advanced Placement. Educational tracking is one of the most prevalent crises that African American males face within the public education system. In order for students to enjoy fully all of the benefits of Advanced Placement once they entered Riverfalls H.S., they would need to be placed on the advanced academic track earlier in

their educational career. In some cases, this identification needed to be done as early as elementary school. Mrs. George stated that the best opportunity for students to take part in the advanced academic track was in junior high. Mr. James, the principal at Riverfalls H.S., agreed with this sentiment.

> It is very difficult for a student to jump into the AP track at this level. If they have not been in those pre-AP classes, or some kind of advanced academic classes starting in sixth or seventh grade, then the gap is really wide to try to jump into that when they get to this level. So the opportunity is there. We never shut it down, especially if a student moves in or if a student has gotten really motivated and decides they want to try something, then it is always there.

> Mrs. Cobb expressed the same sentiment as Mr. James, "If you are not already there now, by the time you get to us, you are probably not going to get there." This does not mean that the opportunity is not there. Mrs. Gibbs explained:

> If they do not start out on pre-AP in junior high, it is almost impossible. Not impossible. It is very difficult for anybody to succeed without being pre-AP'ed up from on-level to just go into AP as a junior. It is not impossible, but their skill set for the EOC, a one-page essay, is not the same thing. I want you to write pages and pages, and it is just, it is very difficult.

Although the majority of the participants talked about the difficulty of seeing success without early tracking, it must also be stated that several teachers expressed that it is teacher discretion on tracking a student up if they show potential. Although African American males showing academic potential still faced conditions that led to them possibly exiting the Advanced Placement program.

Factors Contributing to Advanced Placement Bailout

When looking at the factors that led to students exiting the Advanced Placement program, a lot of the input that I received revolved around fatigue of the students. This fatigue set in through the impact of summer assignments, difficulty of workload, and the heavy focus on

writing. Although some African American males who participated in the study stuck it out, too often they stated that their peers dropped to on-level. Chris, a student participant, responded:

> I know they [peers] stopped because they was like, it is too much work. And they had saw some of their grades drop. Well, to me, it wasn't that hard, you just wanted to do it. Well, you didn't really want to do it, but you knew you had to.

The excessive amount of summer assignments continued to be a point of contention from leadership all the way down through the teacher ranks. Mrs. George, when talking about the amount of work that was assigned to incoming sophomores, said:

> It was a tremendous amount of work, just huge. And a lot of it was just planning ahead for the school year. Work, like making flashcards for the whole trimester for a class, that they will use later. The thinking is to do the work over the summer so that when you get busier during the school year, they will already be created. And I get that. But I need people to understand what they are laying on kids to do over the summer. Summer assignments, particularly, discourage your less likely advanced academic students.

Some departments saw summer assignments as a means to weed students out. Mrs. Sims said, "We have a summer assignment for our course that the other courses do not, and so that weeds people out if they do not want to do that part." This sentiment was not seen throughout the campus. In regard to her class, Mrs. Gibbs said that if a student does not complete the summer reading, it was going to be fine. They just need to get caught up.

Another area that contributed to African American males exiting the program was the workload, or amount of homework that students were assigned, throughout the year. When students were faced with a choice of completing copious amounts of work in Advanced Placement or getting a schedule change to on-level, reluctant learners would often elect for the schedule change. Mrs. Sims said, "It is usually the workload that is a thing for them or vocabulary tests that have 70 words on them, or everything is timed, and they are just not used to that restriction." Although Mrs. Gibbs took a different approach to homework for her class. According to Mrs. Gibbs:

I try not to, even with my AP kids, give them a lot of homework because they might have to work. Or what if they are in band, or what if they are busy all of the time? If I can get what I need to here, and if they get more of an honors kind of program, it is better for them in the long run.

The heavy emphasis on writing was brought up by multiple teachers as a reason that students exit Advanced Placement and return to on-level. When talking about the writing demands of her course, Mrs. Sims stated:

Students need to be able to write and annotate on their quiz. This is because our exam is heavy on writing. Students will have to be able to sit down and write for two hours straight. Students think they know how much they have to write, and then they catch a cramp halfway through the exam.

Mrs. Gibbs also brought up the heavy emphasis on writing within her class. She said:

So much of it is the independent work too. I mean, okay, well here is time to get down, but it is all on your own. It is writing. You cannot work with a friend. It is just going to be you. Let us see what your product is going to be.

The unfortunate outcome of exiting the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S. was that, depending on the course, a student's only option was on-level. As evidenced by teachers, students electing to return to on-level classes only led to boredom and underachieving. The next section details my findings on educational gatekeeping.

Educational Gatekeeping

There were numerous mechanisms stated by educators at Riverfalls H.S. that led to educational gatekeeping. The AP contract, minimum grade requirement, lack of opportunities to track into Advanced Placement, and the qualifying test are but a few of the ways that students got locked out of Advanced Placement. The AP contract was a school board-approved document that outlined that students who were taking part in the AP program must maintain an average of at least a 74 in the class. It's important to note that a grade lower than 70 is considered failing. They must also take and pass the AP qualifying test for the given course. If they scored at least a

two on the exam, they must take the given AP exam. Failure to take the exam would result in

losing the added weighted grade points for that AP course. All students and their parents must

sign and return this document at the start of the course.

Although the AP contract seemed like a binding document, most of the teachers

interviewed stated that they make the students fill the form out, but they do not worry about

holding them to it. Mr. Thomas stated:

> We have the AP contract. Everybody has to maintain a 74,or above in the class or we can
> call on parent-teacher conferences to evaluate whether or not they can continue with the
> rigor in the class. But for the most part, it is up to the teacher regarding the individual
> analysis of the student and whether or not they can handle the class.

Mrs. Sims had concerns about the inequity of the AP contract. She said:

> I mean, to be honest, that contract does not really matter. I do not know anybody that
> really enforces it. If a kid has a 70 and they are doing their best, we are not going to kick
> them out. Unless the kid is failing consistently, no one is going to really remove them
> because we want them to stay.

She went on to say:

> I guess there is not going to be an equal way to do the contract, so I do not want to follow
> it because if a kid is getting a 68, but they are in here all the time and they are working
> really hard, they are doing their best, and they are not sitting being bored in a regular
> class. I'm not going to be like, well, you need to go to the regular class. But then if I
> have a smart kid who never does his daily work and has a 73, then I guess he should not
> be in here either. But I just feel like that is not equitable in the contract, so I just do not
> follow it.

Although there was a minimum grade average that students were meant to uphold, most of the

teachers stated that they were willing to overlook it if the student was working hard and trying

their best.

Limited opportunities to join the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S. kept

students from being able to track up when necessary. Often during the interviews,

teachers/administrators spoke of students already being locked into the Advanced Placement

track. Those looking for a chance could also see their circumstances as being locked out.

Students who were not identified early in their educational career had limited opportunities to

track into Advanced Placement. Their only option was through courses that did not require

prerequisite skills. Mr. James explained:

> Where we are seeing a little bit of opportunity with students joining Advanced Placement
> is AP Art History. There is not a prerequisite type course for that. Also, sometimes we
> will get kids, like a minute ago, I mentioned the AP Computer Science Principles. And
> so there is not necessarily a specific prerequisite for the computer science to be able to
> jump in. So there are a couple of areas where kids can have their first experience with
> that at the high school level.

The AP qualifying exam was used as a screener to see which students would possibly

score at a level that would earn them college credit. Students who scored a two on the APQT

had their AP exam paid for in May. While those who did not score a two could still take the

exam, they had to pay for it themselves. Mrs. Sims also said that students who qualify for free

and reduced lunch could elect to pay for their exam at a reduced cost. When asked about the

students who would possibly score a one, Mrs. Sims said:

> Because the district cares about the scores, weeding out the ones is the big thing. If you
> think a kid is going to get a one, then maybe have them go, but you should not be so
> brutal that kids do not want to sign up for it or take it. There is no reason to be like that.
> Keep it balanced.

When looking at these mechanisms used for gatekeeping it must be said that teachers

truly believed that the APQT was not a predictor of success. There were students who scored a

one on the APQT who went on to score a three on the exam. According to Mrs. Sims, it all

depends on how much effort students wanted to put in in order to achieve success. This

furthered the idea that standardized testing was not a true means for gauging student attainment

of knowledge and skills.

Contributing Measures to (Mis)Identification

When asked why African American males were, or were not, represented within the Advanced Placement program, educators and students alike talked about the need to identify students at an early age. Mrs. George elaborated on early identification by saying:

> It is looking at slightly above average intelligence or aptitude. So just a little bit above the middle of the bell curve. And it is like Bs in class and STAAR scores. And they should have two of the three of those. Now some of our elementary programs are so big that they really have to screen for three of three.

Students who were not identified but felt that they should be part of the gifted program could submit a portfolio that showed off their work. Mrs. George said that a campus committee reviewed the portfolio, but often it ended up on her desk. This served two purposes which was to get a fresh pair of eyes on the work and because she did not have any preconceived notions about the student.

Bias within the identification process was also a concern that Mrs. George attempted to address. She stated that most of the identification measures for gifted and talented were served through the English/Language Arts setting, which could cause an issue for students who were linguistically challenged, such as the ELL population within the district. She went on to say:

> We want to get them where they can be successful in an advanced English class. Because it is the foundation of so many other subjects. But in elementary, if I can get the teachers trained to do something different for those kids, including the highly capable ones, the talented kids, then maybe we can see them really grow their potential more so. We are working on it. It is a big task, but we are on it.

While Mrs. George was focused on identification measure bias, another area of consternation was teacher bias within the identification process. Mrs. George talked about how some teachers still wanted Advanced Placement to be the cream of the crop or crème de la crème. She explained how that mentality locked students out of Advanced Placement. She reiterated that she would continue to push the viewpoint out there that AP was supposed to be for

everyone, so we need to let everyone try. Mark categorized the teachers who wanted to limit the program as the mean teachers. He went on to say, "They are super mean, they don't want to give you extra credit and don't know how to teach." Mrs. Sims went on to say:

> Implicit bias does kick in when a student is struggling. You start to think, well, you don't have the scaffolding for this. And I think people are quicker to let those [struggling] kids go. Instead of fighting for them or kind of working it out, or trying to meet them where they are and elevate them.

Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010), when talking about the tenet of crisis, said that systems that seem to benefit the underprivileged in fact serve to maintain structures that create systems that place group interests against one another, masking the reality of joint dehumanization. These systems, such as the reliance on standardized testing and antiquated identification systems for gifted education programs, were highlighted in participant responses throughout the study. Data from the tenet of crisis also helped shape the advanced academic equity model theme of Identifying Academic Shortcomings. Participants throughout this section talked about how these systems continued to perpetuate a tiered educational system that often found African American males locked out of key educational opportunities that could lead to higher academic outcomes.

Education

According to Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010), the tenet of education is defined as the teaching and learning that takes place in any social group, not just formal schooling. For this study, I have defined the tenet of education as being those interactions between all stakeholders, including educators, African American male students, and their parents, which lead to positive academic outcomes within the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S. Any conversation from participant interviews that focused on stakeholders learning about and teaching African American males was clustered together and placed under the tenet of education. The major categories included student support systems needed, village mentality, a need for

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cultural proficiency, finding opportunities for success, district/campus communication, finding

the hidden gems, need for early identification, and filling the math gap. The following are my

findings for the tenet of education, starting with student support systems needed.

Student Support Systems Needed

Often, teachers interviewed stated that they were the first line of support for their

students. Counselors were called on as the next line of support. Mrs. George said, if students are

interested in advanced academics, they need to go talk to a counselor. Teachers expressed the

need to be able to have critical conversations with their students to ensure that they were

accessing resources needed to be successful. Mrs. Sims talked about the benefit of having her

students for the entire year by saying:

> There has to be a partnership between the teacher and the student. I can't fix them, right,
> but I love talking to kids. Just having conversations with them and kind of talking
> through the issues, you can make a plan. They don't always want to talk to their teacher
> about stuff. I'm pretty lucky now. I feel bad for teachers who teach on-level who have
> them for twelve weeks and never see them again. These little suckers are stuck with me
> for a whole year.

Mrs. Gibbs followed up:

> We try to talk them into staying in because it's a better experience, especially the ones
> that you have a couple of weeks with and you know that if they go to on-level they are
> going to be bored. Yeah, you'll have 100 or 98, but you're just going to be so bored. It'd
> be much better to be an okay student over here.

Although the African American male students agreed that they worked with their teachers

as much as possible, they did so for personal needs. Sam stated that due to his stage fright, he

maintained a good relationship with his teachers in case he needed something. William echoed

that he liked to be cool with his teachers in case he needed to get help from them. African

American males' hesitance to work with teachers could possibly be explained by their perception

of hidden bias. When Chris stated that he did not believe that his teachers saw color, Mark was

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quick to make a point of saying that it was not the case, because some teachers can hide their

bias so well. Chris also made a point that knowing that Mr. Thomas genuinely was reaching out

to him made him feel that he really cared about him. He went on to say, "It means a lot when

you know they [teachers] care."

Although educators stated that they worked with counselors in order to meet the needs of

the students when challenges arose, educators also were concerned with whether counselors were

really having those conversations to find out why students wanted to drop. On a number of

occasions, educators wondered if the counselors were even attempting to keep them in Advanced

Placement. Mrs. Gibbs expressed her concern by saying:

> They have to take their schedule down and talk to a counselor. I hope there might be
> some conversation about maybe you want to do this. But a lot of times, I think they're
> like, okay, well if you really don't like this, you shouldn't take the class instead of
> encouraging them [students] to work harder.

Sam added to this concern by saying:

> My seventh grade pre-AP math class, like 60% of the students dropped out. And I feel
> like they just went up to the people who make the schedule and said, I don't want this
> anymore, and they said okay. And there's not a person there saying, well, why don't you
> want it anymore? This could actually help you and the benefits of learning this. I feel
> like they know the subject and that they know it well. But they just don't want to do the
> work.

Village Mentality

There was an overall sense that it would take a village mentality in order for students to

be successful in the Advanced Placement program. As Lopez (2003) stated, school leaders must

be prepared to engage individuals that are culturally different from them. Mrs. George talked

about the need for teachers to be willing to work with students. She went on to say:

> The majority of the teachers are very willing to work with students, eager to help them be
> successful, eager to invest in them, some of them less so. And some of them, it depends
> on their outside of school commitments, and the kid's availability outside of school hours
> as well that can make it really difficult. One thing I know about Riverfalls is that the

teachers tutor each other's kids. So that the kids, every single day of the week, can go in and get help, regardless of the teacher's own commitments outside of class.

Mrs. Simms summed up this sentiment by saying, "If you can't work with a kid, I don't know why you're doing this, to be honest." Mrs. Sheer described it as the heart of the teacher or doing what is right for students.

Mrs. George also talked about how she used translators to help at the advanced academics informational meetings. By having district employees who were able to translate in Arabic, French, and Spanish, Mrs. George felt that she was able to reach those parents who might not be inclined to come due to language barriers. This was her way of welcoming them into the advanced academic community. She also made it a point to have the advanced academic information PowerPoint presentation, which was on the district webpage, translated into the district's top four languages. She hoped that families would see that, be more informed, and hopefully, be more comfortable about their students being in advanced classes.

Cultural Proficiency

Riverfalls H.S. has been noted as being one of the most diverse high school campuses in the area. Because of this, Mr. James, the principal of Riverfalls H.S., ensured that his campus was maintaining progress toward becoming a culturally proficient campus. Mrs. Gibbs talked about how Mr. James put together a minority focus group that concentrated on student voice and how certain campus policies affected particular student body populations. One area of focus was behavior in the classroom and how certain disciplinary codes were used to adversely affect minority populations.

When I talked to teachers at Riverfalls H.S., it was clear that they saw Mr. James as a culturally responsive leader. Mr. Thomas considered Mr. James to be pretty responsive to any problems. Mr. Thomas went on to say:

Last year and the year before, he addressed problems that he saw within the community. Particularly, he was seeing a trend among students and responses regarding teacher implicit bias toward black students. So he started to train us on implicit bias and understanding the impact of implicit bias and trying to help us recognize it and how to check it, how to make baby steps.

Mrs. Sims looked at it through the lens of advanced academics. She said:

First step is that we've had training in implicit bias which has been a thing where like, what do you think of when you think advanced academics? Probably Asian kids. That's what you think. You don't think of black kids being in advanced academics. And so, how can we change the mindset and the perception of people? Be aware of your thoughts that you're having when you look at students.

When talking about the need for cultural proficiency, Mrs. George said, "If you make things right and better for a group in total, that's going to help the kids who are in advanced academics or have potential."

Although Riverfalls H.S. had shown progress toward being a more culturally proficient campus as attested by faculty and students, there was room for improvement. Mrs. Sheer expressed her need for more inclusivity training. She said, "Even in things like the examples I give or things like that. How can I do a better job of picking non-Caucasian examples? Because I would like to do it." When talking to the African American male students, the overwhelming sense was that they wanted to see more diversity within the teaching ranks. Mark said:

Give us black male teachers. Black educated teachers who know both. Who of course may code-switch but who also know the streets and who know the books. Because I've had only one my entire lifetime. And he was a good English teacher.

Chris also echoed the same sentiment by saying, "Get somebody that look like me." William talked about teachers pre-judging students. He said:

Don't expect everyone to be on the same level. Like I said before, it was my first time in an AP class. She was already expecting me to be at a high level. And I was just not okay with that.

He furthered this by saying:

I feel like teachers should know the students that come to the class. They should know this student's coming from a regular, this student's already in an AP class, IB, dropout, or whatever. They should know before trying to teach something. And that's actually encouraged by the students.

Finding Opportunities for Success

When talking to participants at Riverfalls H.S., a lack of opportunity for students to track up if they missed their chance earlier in their educational career into the Advanced Placement program was an unfortunate reality. This led to the need of the district to learn other ways that they could get students into the Advanced Placement program through nontraditional methods. Mr. James and Mrs. George were looking for ways to draw more students into the program through courses that do not require prerequisite courses to enroll. Mrs. George went on to say:

I look ahead and see what's coming out in AP, or what we don't offer that I think would be a good fit. We submitted a course proposal for AP Computer Science Principles. And I am really excited about that. Because that's a course that girls and students of color have shown that they do really well in and it doesn't have a prerequisite to take. It's kind of like an introductory computer programming course.

The history department also talked about their department being an open enrollment department for students looking to take Advanced Placement courses without having prerequisite backgrounds. Mrs. Sims said:

I mean, I guess we have open enrollment, so anybody can do it. There's no prerequisite, really. If you don't take my class and you want to take AP US History, you have to talk to your counselor and then the counselor will email me and ask, or they'll email their old regular World History teacher to say, this kid is interested in doing advanced work. Do you think they are capable? But we can't turn anybody away. Anybody can be in class. I have several kids who didn't even take pre-AP in junior high. They were in regular World Geography, and then they got in this class.

Mrs. Sims, during her interview, also talked about the need to get students to take something. Because of the openness of the Advanced Placement program, there was something for everyone. In order to drum up interest for her class because there was not a direct path to it, Mrs. Sheer opted to hand out information flyers to the department teachers to hand out to

students interested in taking her class. When comparing the opportunities that students had in

Advanced Placement versus on-level, Mrs. Gibbs said that AP was a better place for students.

William, when thinking about the choice to take AP said:

> When I think about I'm doing something hard, I'll probably be like, once I get through this, I'll look back on it and thank myself for doing something harder because it will help me out in colleges and my GPA. My future self will be more thankful that I worked through it instead of dropping out.

District and Campus Communication

Riverfalls ISD is considered a Continuous Improvement district. This means that there

are systems in place that look at the effectiveness of programs and ways to improve them. Mr.

James summarized the district learning cycle by saying, "We take a look to make sure that we're

getting good results, analyzing all of that data. And then if it is not the results we want, then why

not, and how do we fix it?" This system of continuously improving on the teaching systems

within Riverfalls ISD, through dialogue with all stakeholders, fit the tenet of education. This

also applied to the idea of vertical alignment where Mrs. Cobb felt improvement was needed.

She said:

> I don't know how much vertical teaming there is with the ninth grade with the high schools. There used to be a very concerted effort for that. I mean, I used to know as a junior high teacher, I knew all of the teachers within my department. I knew all the high school teachers. And there was a very concerted effort to do that. I just don't know where our effort is to do that now. I think it's something that needs to be looked at.

This dialogue would help ensure a better transition between junior high and high school. Mr.

James added:

> We have been pushing and trying to get more dialogue between the high school and junior high teachers so that the advanced academic teachers at the junior high level know more about what happens. If I'm teaching a pre-AP/IB course at the junior high, what really happens in the AP or the IB course that I'm supposedly the pre for? So trying to help with some of that vertical alignment to make sure that they realize that they are part of the system and a critical first step of that system.

Mrs. Cobb also talked about the need for junior high teachers to visit the high school

classes. When talking about teachers who had only taught at the junior high level she went on to

say:

> If all you've done is teach junior high at the ninth grade, if you haven't come up here and actually sat in a class, how do you know where they [students] need to go? I think that it would be beneficial for some junior high teachers to come up here and actually sit in some of the AP classes to see what their students are going to go into and what it looks like.

Although there was concern with the matriculation of students from junior high into the

high school ranks, teachers stated on numerous occasions that collaboration amongst their peers

in the high school ranks was great. Mrs. Sheer said, "Some of us have taught AP a long time,

which doesn't mean we can't learn from training, but often it's through collaboration that we get

the most training." Mrs. Sims, during her interview, talked about the importance of collaborating

with peers and networking by saying:

> One of my good friends teaches the same class in the district, so he and I work together. I'm also in Schoology. It's kind of like, it was before Google Classroom really became a thing, and there's a site on there. It's very well organized so you can find stuff that you need. And then also, one of my friends just started teaching the same course in another district, and so she helps me, but everything has to be modified down because other people teach the class for the whole year, and we teach it in eight weeks.

This level of collaboration was also found in the analysis of data across the district. Mrs.

Sheer stated that she worked with Mrs. Cobb to analyze the number of students dropping out of

the Advanced Placement program within her department. She did note that they did not look at it

from an ethnicity standpoint but strictly from a numbers standpoint.

Finding the Hidden Gems

Mrs. George talked about the importance of finding the hidden gems within the school

population. She characterized these students as those who were gifted but were under the

identification radar. These students also were not identified using traditional measures and were

harder to spot. Mrs. George said, "I really try to encourage my counselors, principals, and advanced academic specialists to actively look for these students, which is why we screen them every year, through the end of third grade." One means of trying to identify hidden gems was through the administration of the PSAT to all 8th graders. She went on to say:

> One of the reasons why I moved us from ninth grade to eighth grade on PSAT is because I wanted a reason to test every kid instead of just the ones who paid for it in eighth grade and to catch them earlier. Because if they show potential, we want to direct them into advanced classes.

She later talked about an AP Spanish language course that was offered to native speakers. She spoke of an amazing teacher who was going the extra mile to find the hidden gems by saying:

> He goes out and finds them in sixth grade. And we sponsor a little two-day camp that he has for them over the summer, and then takes them on a field trip and stuff. We pay for that. He starts working with them from seventh grade and up. When I would help with pre-administration bubbling for AP Human Geography, I would see several of the same kids. Students who are all native Spanish speakers. He's got them now where they're taking advanced courses, just because they see themselves as AP students.

> William had a similar story of how he was identified later in his educational career for

Advanced Placement from one of his teachers. He told the group:

> In my ninth grade year, I was in English, and the teacher was like I should take AP classes. But I said no, because it was going to change my schedules, and I was not up for that. And in my junior year, that's when I got all AP classes. That's when I started AP classes, and it was pretty good.

> Often, teachers responded that students who were starting off their journey in Advanced

Placement needed to be given time to adjust to the level of rigor of the new classroom setting.

Mr. Thomas talked about the importance of giving students the time to settle in by saying:

> The first six weeks always is the worst. It's the one that sucks the worst. Once they make it through that, they get through the rhythm of the class, they make it through understanding how to manage your time, managing all the various stuff that they have to do. And then it just becomes part of their regular routine and then they're fine.

> Having that adjustment period was paramount to ensuring that students do not bail out of

the program. Mrs. Sheer and Mrs. Sims also talked about ways that they had built safety nets

into their teaching because they knew that their content was difficult to ensure that students kept

moving forward. Mrs. Sheer gave her students an opportunity to have their projects pre-graded

so that they knew what needed to be corrected before the final grade was given. Students were

also able to do this for homework assignments. When talking to Mrs. Sims, she talked about

giving her students the option to make corrections on all assignments within her class. She said

that the first time students fail something, they take it really hard, so this was her way of working

through that.

Early Identification

Through talking to teachers and administrators at Riverfalls H.S., it was made clear that

there needs to be a bigger effort by the district to identify students earlier in the educational

pipeline. Due to the limited opportunities at Riverfalls H.S. that were discussed earlier, the best

chance for students to get on the Advanced Placement track is in elementary and junior high.

Mr. James talked about how in the past they would send a recruitment letter to elementary

students who showed potential. He went on to say:

> One of the things that we try to do, we did it several years ago, and then a few years, we
> didn't do it, and we're trying to reup the idea of identifying those fifth graders and sixth
> graders that are showing strong academic potential. They get a letter from me,
> acknowledging their academic potential, and encouraging them to continue through
> junior high. That kind of letter that plants a seed is the idea. How much impact that has?
> I don't know, but it's at least an effort that I know that Riverfalls H.S. is making to try to
> plant that seed early.

Chris talked about getting identified through one of these letters when he was in

elementary. He said:

> For me, it started in 5th grade. They would send letters to my parents, and be like, I
> excelled enough to be placement in the program. And then as the grades went by, each
> class you would stay in it.

Mrs. Gibbs highlighted the need for the district to use the letter to recruit for AP just as hard as they do for IB. She said:

> I think it would be important to start pushing and recruiting just like they do for the IB program. Well, maybe you have a letter that says IB and AP because I know that's a really big deal. And I mean, IB is a good deal. But AP is also valid and important.

Filling the Math Gap

Because Riverfalls H.S. served sophomores through seniors, if students did not enter the pre-AP math pipeline early, students found themselves in a peculiar predicament by the time they entered Riverfalls H.S. In order to reach the upper-level mathematics courses, students had to take Pre-AP in 8th grade, which was algebra I, then geometry in 9th grade, and algebra II in 10th grade. According to Mr. James, "As a sophomore, you can't jump into pre-AP algebra II because you haven't had geometry at all. If you didn't start it in eighth grade, there's not a good entry point." Through analysis, the district identified an issue with students who were unprepared to enter algebra II their sophomore year. In order to give students an opportunity to get back on track, Riverfalls started offering a summer geometry course. When I asked about the course, Mrs. George explained:

> We'd have to check with the math coordinator, but it's gone on for two summers. And 20 or so students each summer, I believe, have been successful in that geometry course. And the majority of them carry on and stay in advanced academics. It's an opportunity for those students that have shown potential, and want to make that stretch, to be able to get to calculus, if that's where they want to go.

Mrs. Sheer also echoed the same feelings about the summer geometry course as Mrs. George. She went on to say:

> We offer a summer pre-AP geometry course after ninth grade for students that might not have been identified in 8th grade or possibly moved into our district. It gives them the opportunity to take a pre-AP summer course so that they can then go to pre-AP algebra II here at the high school level.

According to Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010), face-to-face dialogue between people who hold different worldviews is crucial in order to understand the affects that society has created on their current situation and to break free of that hold. The findings presented on the tenet of education confirmed that dialogue between educators and African American males was crucial for creating systems of support that would possibly lead to academic success within the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S. After analyzing the findings for the tenet of crisis, the theme of Supporting the Needs of Students for the advanced academic equity model materialized. This theme highlighted the need for communication between all stakeholders, along with a need for early identification for gifted education programs, and teacher/counselor support systems. Participants emphasized a need for a village mentality to see students attain their greatest potential.

<div align="center">Transformative Action</div>

Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) defined transformative action as the alteration and actions needed to resolve the identified crisis. I defined transformative action in this study as the actions needed in order for African American males to gain equitable opportunities within the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S. When participants talked about what corrective actions needed to take place to allow African American males to take part and be successful in the Advanced Placement program, those ideas were clustered together and placed in the tenet of transformative action. The major categories included missing Black males, stereotypes associated with Black males, the Black male identity, African American male retention woes, and parental engagement. The following are my findings for the tenet of transformative action, beginning with missing Black males.

Missing Black Males

Within the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S., participants made it clear that there was a bigger international influence than there was a representation of African American males. Chris gave us a picture of his class by saying:

> It be a lot of Indians in there. Like, in my class, the class I just came from, I went to junior high with that, so it was a lot of people from Pakistan and Bangladesh. And you only find like, it's two black people in there, me and a girl. Then a couple mixed, white, and some Hispanic descent. But for the most part, it's all diverse. We the minority most of the time, the few.

Often, the sentiment of the African American male students who were interviewed was that they were either one of one, or maybe one of two African American students in their Advanced Placement course. Mr. Thomas confirmed this thought during his interview when he said, "I got two African American males in my three AP classes. And that is a problem."

African American male students felt isolated in their classes, which could be detrimental to their mental wellbeing. When faced with the fact that he might be the only African American male in a class, Chris said, "I'll probably stay to myself. That's what I'll do in that class. And then it will affect me, I'll just be like, there ain't really nobody in here like me." When I asked the teachers if they knew about these feelings of isolation, most of them were unaware. Mrs. Sheer stated, "I don't know that I realized that they're realizing that." She wasn't sure that she had made it a point to think about that [isolation].

When asked why African American males were not represented well within the Advanced Placement program, Mrs. Gibbs hinted at behavior being a possible cause. She elaborated on the idea by saying:

> Well, they are acting out in class. And so that must mean they do not need to be in an advanced academic room, which is not relevant, but they might see that misbehavior is not as intellect. So they get shimmied over here.

When asked about African American males in her class, Mrs. Sims said, "I just don't have a lot of black male students in the first place. So they are not coming to me." Mrs. Gibbs added to this thought by saying:

> Whether it is expectation or choice, or this would be better, or like you said earlier maybe it is about this is to save face by saying I don't need to be in this class with all these smart kids. But I don't see that. But that doesn't mean they don't feel that way. I don't think that kids just think of it as another class. But I think there's a whole other subculture out there that I don't know.

What is clear from talking to educators is the lack of African American males in their classes cannot be drilled down to one reason. In the next section, stereotypes associated with African American males are discussed. These stereotypes may explain why Black males are missing within the Advanced Placement program.

Stereotypes Associated with Black Males

A major theme throughout the interviews was the idea of multiple stereotypes that loomed over African American males within Riverfalls H.S. One of the stereotypes explored was the idea that it was not cool to be the smart kid. Mr. Thomas said:

> Being the smart kid isn't always the most positive thing for African American males. You want to be the tough guy, you want to be the strong guy, you want to be the athletic guy. The smart guy, not so much.

Mark added to this thought of being Black and intelligent by saying:

> It is uncommon to see a black man as intelligent. Like for me, in my case, I made a whole presentation where I was saying how I was recently called the whitest black boy. And because I speak like this, and I don't like to sag my pants and do all the stereotypical black stuff that people usually see and attribute to black culture, that it equivocates me to being white or acting white. And so I feel like with that stigma, I feel like, it makes black men sort of scared to stick with it because they want to be not seen as something that they're not in that sense.

Mrs. George coined students who push away their giftedness as underground gifted. She felt that many African American male students fit this definition of underground gifted. For this

population of students, it was not cool to be smart and it drew too much attention to be seen in the gifted classes.

Mr. James also talked about how advanced academics may not be a priority for some cultures. He went on to say:

> If I'm that fourth or fifth-grade student, my older brother didn't do it, my older sister didn't do that. I don't have any cousins that did that. My mom didn't do that, and my uncle didn't do it. There's nobody to say, oh, that's really an option. They're not thinking it's an option and then suddenly you wake up and it's 11th grade, and now, I can't.

Sam countered this idea by saying:

> It was expected for me to be in pre-AP and AP classes like that. It was strong from my parents that I did have high grades. And so it wasn't like they just flat out told me. They expected it from me. Basically, just subtle hints that I should basically be in AP.

The overwhelming sense from talking to educators was that outside obligations, either work-related or extracurricular related, caused conflict with academics at Riverfalls H.S. These conflicts sometimes caused African American males to choose to exit the advanced academic program. Mrs. Sims, when talking about students working while in school, said, "A lot of black students do [work], and so some of them are working part-time, and some of them work full-time, and I know that they really struggle with getting stuff done." Mrs. Gibbs went on to say, "I try to give them time to get work done because I don't really, I'm not trying to push them outside of class because they do have so many other responsibilities." As long as students were showing effort, educators interviewed expressed a willingness to work with students rather than push them out of the Advanced Placement program.

The Black Male Identity

As stated earlier in the review of the literature, often African American males fell victim to a number of stereotypes. Educators and students at Riverfalls H.S. were on a mission to

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change that narrative. Mrs. George talked about how she would alter her advanced academic

information to fifth- and sixth-grade parents by saying, "I am going to put photos of some of our

kids with my information. And it is going to show that we already have kids who look like their

kid in our program." She also went on to say how she wanted to be mindful to invite students

who represented more diverse backgrounds to speak at the ninth grade nights. Mr. Thomas

talked about how African American males already had traits visible needed to be successful in

the Advanced Placement program. He went on to say:

> With African American males, I don't believe it's an initiative problem. They have that. They have the ability to work and work hard. And most of them have one of their parental units who is going to be strict enough to make sure that they're judicious about using their time.

> Sam explained his thinking by saying, "I always had the mentality that I was going to

take the hardest classes. And right now, I'm probably taking the hardest courses a senior could

take. And it just started when I was young." Chris detailed his drive to keep going in Advanced

Placement with, "It wasn't that hard for me, you just wanted to do it. Well, you didn't really

want to do it, but you knew you had to. Yeah, that's all. Let me stick it out." African American

male students interspersed these thoughts throughout the focus group interview.

Chris and Mark also talked about the need to remain true to their African American

identity while being academically successful. Mark talked about his disdain for having to

change who he is to fit the identity of the room. He said:

> I'm like this with anyone and everyone, whether they talk like me or not, act like me or not, think like me or not, or the same color as me or not. I'm like this with everybody, and I'm quite versatile.

Although Chris agreed with Mark, he illustrated the need to code-switch. He went on to say:

> Everybody know I'm going to have the same country slang, Deep South slang, so. But you can't say this and this, because they might not know what it is. When you're talking to your boss at a job, you kind of have to clean it up and stuff. Or you're talking to a

teacher, you have to clean up your slang and stuff. Let's say that I see the head principal. He'll ask me how am I doing, and I'll say alright, great, or something like that. But if I see the black assistant principal, he'll ask me how I'm doing, and I'll say something else.

Although Chris saw the need to code-switch, Mark talked about how he hated it. To him, it was seen as fake. His rebuttal was:

For me personally, whenever I see other people doing it [code switching], it's kind of seen as fake, and I just don't like being fake to people. Because I am like this all the time. All my life I have been told to be myself, because I am different. And so to see that, it just counters it.

As talked about earlier, because of the lack of African American males in the Advanced Placement program, it was imperative for students like Sam to adapt to their surroundings. He talked about dealing with isolation and networking by saying:

Most of my friends were not in there. So it was kind of difficult. But I was in there, and I started getting friends in that class which just kept me going. Since my friends were in that class, I'm also going to be in that class. So it just kept going, and I'm still in that class. In my, I think, last trimester, I was going to drop out of anatomy. And one of my friends just kind of said I was going to just stay in, and pumped me up a bit. And I'm still in that class and I'm doing great.

Chris and Mark also talked about how having a Black male teacher left a lasting impression on them. For both of these Black students, it was nice having someone in the room that understood them. Behind those four walls, they truly could be themselves. Having a teacher who personified what Black students strived for could be the difference in them staying or exiting the Advanced Placement program.

African American Male Retention Woes

When talking to the participants at Riverfalls H.S., it was very apparent that minority populations were not being monitored. When asked about recruiting/retention, the majority of participants stated that there was not much, if anything, being done to look into why historically marginalized populations such as African American males were not represented in greater

numbers. When I asked about any plans that focused specifically on African American males, since they ranked at the bottom of all percentages among ethnic and gender populations within the Advanced Placement program, the response was a resounding none. When asked about retention plans, Mr. James stated:

> I really do not know that I have seen anything specific in regards to African American students or African American males. But once again, it is not really a fair question to me because they are locked in. So I think there are certainly issues that we do not have enough African American students in our AP program. I am not trying to say that there is not a problem. I am saying that when they finally get to me, the problem is already long since passed.

Mrs. Sheer added to this thought by saying:

> I do not know that things are explicit about retaining. I think just as an AP teacher, you want students to be successful in your course. But I do not know that I am thinking of it necessarily as a directive of any sort related to ethnicity or gender.

This sentiment was seen throughout the teachers/administrators interviewed. Teachers such as Mrs. Sims stated, "To be honest, I do not think that there is any targeted recruitment or anything like that." One teacher also said that she was not sure that recruitment/retainment of African American males was a focus of the administration at Riverfalls H.S.

Parental Engagement

Throughout the data collection phase, educator and student participants had opposite views on parental involvement. From the teachers' standpoint, parents took more of a hands off approach, while the African American male students talked about how parents were pushing them to be the best that they could be. Mrs. Gibbs talked about the lack of parent engagement by saying:

> When we did open house, I think I had maybe ten parents. And I think five or six of them were white. I don't think I had a single parent come during the school day. I sent an email out to join my Google Classroom, and I had maybe ten parents interested in doing that. I mean, ten out of a hundred, but ten. So yeah, I don't get much parent involvement.

Mrs. Sheer added to this by saying:

> I would say just in general for any student, it's mainly me reaching out to the parent. I don't often have parents. There's a few helicopter people who were on it the first day. But by the time they're seniors, that's where this group is.

For Mrs. Sims, parents were proactive in contacting her for Advanced Placement, but not for on-level courses. She went on to say, "I feel like there is a lot more parent involvement in advanced academics than there is in on-level. Parents are checking grades. They definitely all check the HAC (Home Access Center [online grade portal]) and email me with questions."

A concern of Riverfalls H.S. was how to change the perception of parents that had a negative view of the school system. Mrs. George said, "We know a lot of parents do want to be involved. And some do want to be involved, but they have that innate distrust of the school system. And how do we overcome that?" Mr. James tackled this issue by creating a principal advisory committee of African American parents and community members. Their goal was to create an environment where parents, community members, and school leaders were partnering together to identify and improve systems that were in place at Riverfalls H.S.

Although the African American males within this study did not talk about their parents actively advocating for them in Riverfalls H.S., they often talked about the influence that their parents had on their decision to continue in the Advanced Placement program. Mark spoke of his mom's goal for him by saying:

> My mom wanted to see me have the same education, if not better, than what she had. Then she wanted me to take part in that sort of curriculum. So then I feel like from then on, it was just kind of embedded into my brain that this was just something that I was going to do.

Sam talked about the role that his parents played in him taking part in advanced academics. He went on to say:

> My parents played a heavy role. Because it wasn't really that my later year in high

school that they really care about academics. It was more like my earlier years of elementary school that I had to turn every single thing in. I had to do my best on every work. It just instilled a cycle to me that I have to do my best. I have to work hard which just basically kept me all the way through AP and IB in that I was self-motivating myself, reflecting self motivations my parents gave me when I was younger. Basically, I probably wouldn't be in AP classes if it wasn't for my parents.

So from listening to educators and African American male students, it appeared that although parents were not as visible at Riverfalls H.S., their presence was being felt in the home. This was evident by parents encouraging students to be the best that they could be. Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) state people's awareness of their complicity or oppressive behavior has to accompany their response to it. After listening to participants within the study, it was clear that in order to achieve transformative action, it would take efforts of all stakeholders banding together and creating systems that could lead to improved outcomes down the road. This idea helped shape the theme Addressing Invisible African American Males in the advanced academic equity model. These actions included identifying and addressing African American male stereotypes, nurturing the Black male identity, and proactively looking for ways to increase participation of African American males within the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S.

Advanced Academic Equity Model

Although critical social theory was the driving force behind this study, the findings gave me an opportunity to personalize the conceptual framework to the educational site and the phenomenon that inhabits it. Figure 3 illustrates the four major themes of the advanced academic equity model. All four areas have to be addressed in order for African American males to get the support needed in the Advanced Placement program. I see *cultivating the Advanced Placement program* as the close analysis of the Advanced Placement program at Riverfalls H.S. to ensure growth for all students within the program. *Identifying academic shortcomings* seek to

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eliminate those barriers that keep African American males in second tier educational status.

While *supporting the needs of students* looks to identify/provide supports African American

males need in order to realize success at Riverfalls H.S. And finally *addressing invisible African*

American males aims at increasing the overall number of African American males within the

Advanced Placement program while nurturing the Black male identity and eliminating common

stereotypes African American males face each day. These themes are examined further in

chapter 5.
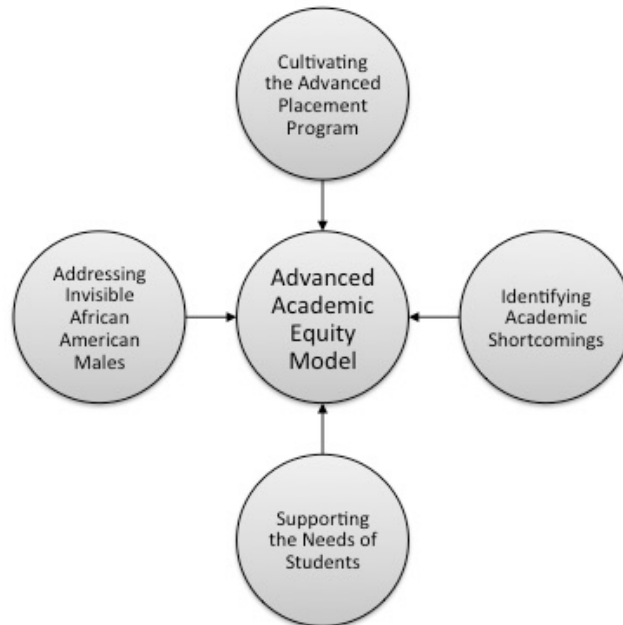
Figure 3. Relationship between themes and advanced academic equity model. The four themes
that emerged from data analysis combine to reveal the needs of African American males in the
Advanced Placement program.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to answer the three research questions guiding the study

that involved an exploration of how and in what ways district and school leaders created or

hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males. The

data collected in this study consisted of seven individual face-to-face interviews and one focus-

group interview with four participants. The participants in this study included district

administrators, two campus administrators, four teachers, and four students from a high school in

a public school district in the North Texas area. The responses provided during the individual

face-to-face interviews and focus-group interview provided answers to the research questions

that were detailed earlier in the study. The data was collected and analyzed to determine what

supports or conditions helped or hindered African American males from attaining equitable

advanced academic program opportunities. From the data, several categories emerged. Using

the four major tenets of critical social theory, categories included: (a) false consciousness -

purpose of Advanced Placement, high school Advanced Placement programming issues,

academic characteristics needed for Advanced Placement, academic foundation, high school

mindset, curriculum shortcomings, teacher training matters; (b) crisis - *focus on testing,*

educational tracking, factors contributing to Advanced Placement bailout, educational

gatekeeping, contributing factors to (mis)identification; (c) education - *student support systems*

needed, village mentality, need for cultural proficiency, finding opportunities for success,

district/campus communication, finding the hidden gems, need for early identification, filling the

math gap; and (d) transformative action - *missing Black males, stereotypes associated with Black*

males, the Black male identity, African American male retention woes, parental engagement.

Chapter five provides an overview of the research study, a revisit of the purpose and significance

of the study, and includes a discussion of the results and conclusions based on the findings and

the related literature. Finally, implications and recommendations for future studies concerning

African American males and advanced academic programming opportunities are shared.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study showed that African American males continue to face inequities in their educational opportunities after numerous educational reauthorizations by the United States education system. Hallett and Venegas (2011) found that inequities are more pronounced when looking at Advanced Placement programs across the country. According to Schneider (2009), Advanced Placement, like other reforms in the US with goals of addressing inequities in schools, has failed to even the playing field. African American males, when compared to other genders and ethnicities, rank at the bottom of the list for participating in the Advanced Placement program administered by College Board (College Board, 2014). Although colleges and universities use AP exam scores for earning college credit, they look more at what AP courses students take and the AP course grade for college admission (Shaw et al., 2012). Because of the reliance of advanced academics in the college admission process, taking some form of advanced academic coursework in high school is imperative to gain entry into prestigious universities (Hallett & Venegas, 2011).

African American males encounter a multitude of barriers, as presented in the literature review, from the onset of entering the United States public education system. Noguera (2003) asserted that students' ethnic or socioeconomic background governs how they are perceived and treated by adults within an educational environment. Because of a perceived deficit in math and reading, African American males are more likely to be placed in remedial classes that provide lower educational experiences compared to other students within the educational system (Ford, 1998, 1996; Kenyatta, 2012; Taliaferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2008). Ford (1995) stated that a lack of teacher referrals is the number one reason why historically underrepresented students are

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under-referred for gifted and Advanced Placement programs. African American educators

taking part in a study by Taliaferro and Decuir-Gunby (2008) expressed concern that students

were being classified into remedial, average, or gifted programs without continued assessment or

on the basis of stereotypes and broad categorizations.

The African American community continues to grow frustrated with failing schools that

leave African American males feeling academically inadequate or inferior by the time they reach

high school (Kincaid & Yin, 2011). This is due to the history of the education system being

rooted in White, middle class American culture (Ford, 2010). Theoharis, Causton, and Tracy-

Bronson (2016) found that when inclusion is a school-wide philosophy that progresses inclusive

service delivery that is well thought out, it can result in social justice, equity, and improved

academic achievement. Thus, positioning African American males to secure a high school

diploma prepares them for postsecondary training and education and creates a clear pathway out

of poverty (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).

This chapter reviews the purpose of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings,

an interpretation of how the experiences of African American males within the Advanced

Placement program informed the themes of the advanced academic equity model through the

lens of critical social theory, and concludes with implications for action and recommendations

for future research.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand what ways district and

school leaders created or hindered equitable advanced academic program opportunities for

African American males. In this case study of a public school system, district administrators,

campus administrators, and teachers with differing backgrounds, experiences, and job duties,

along with African American male students, were interviewed to assess their perspectives on the policies and practices that guide the Advanced Placement program at a diverse high school in the North Texas area. To accomplish this purpose, I examined key components described in the conceptual framework. These components were district policy, district/campus leadership, and the Advanced Placement program through the lens of critical social theory. Each of these areas was addressed through these three research questions:

1. How do district and school policies and practices create or hinder equitable advanced program opportunities for African American males?

2. How do district and school leaders create equitable advanced academic program opportunities for African American males?

3. What conditions have supported or hindered African American males in their ability to enroll and succeed in advanced academic courses?

Chapter 4 revealed the emergent themes and findings of the research data, illustrated with specific examples the participants provided during the individual face-to-face interviews and the student focus-group interview. The following section organizes these results to the advanced academic equity model and provides an in-depth summary of the findings. Major themes supported by the findings of participant interviews include the need to cultivate the Advanced Placement program, identifying academic shortcomings, supporting the needs of students, and addressing invisible African American males (Figure 4).
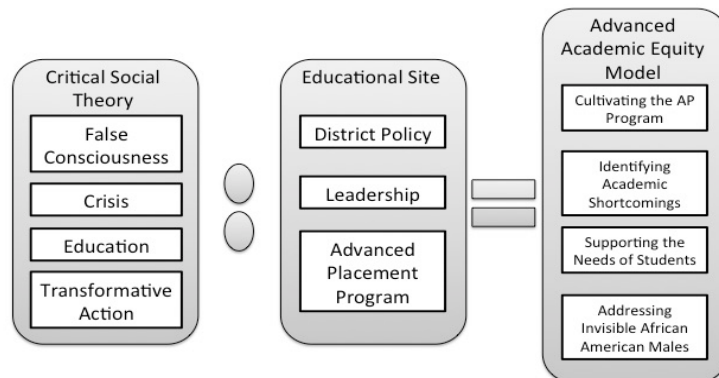

Figure 4. Advanced academic equity model. This graphic depicts how critical social theory informed the development of the conceptual framework's major themes.

Cultivating the Advanced Placement Program

In the findings from the data analysis, the first emerging theme related to the need to cultivate the Advanced Placement program. Responses from both the individual face-to-face interviews with educators and the focus group interview with African American males highlighted the need to take a closer look at the Advanced Placement program. Participants within the study agreed that the purpose of the Advanced Placement program was to provide students with a challenging educational experience, prepare them for post-secondary education, and to receive college credit for their hard work. Hallett and Venegas (2011) said the College Board has challenged students within the educational system and provided incentives for students to perform at a high level on the Advanced Placement exam by working with colleges and universities to grant credits and exemptions. In order to achieve this, educators believed that students must have a certain set of characteristics, which included having solid work ethic, holding themselves accountable, and being able to balance the workload with time management.

The findings also revealed concerns of curriculum shortcomings and how the Eurocentric view of the Advanced Placement program influenced the culminating standardized assessment at the end of the year. Educators within the study expressed that the curriculum they taught was reliant on what they saw on the Advanced Placement exams. Schneider (2009) stated that this method of measuring achievement, or teaching to the test, in the U.S. educational system has proven unreliable. On combatting the Eurocentric view and deflecting dominant White frames, bell hooks (2003) stated that most Black people realize that they live in a White supremacist society and must utilize knowledge of this reality to circumvent oppression and racist exploitation. This was seen in the findings with regard to how African American males

navigated the curriculum of the Advanced Placement program and took in only what was necessary.

Too often, educators stated that if a student was unsuccessful in the Advanced Placement program, it was due to a lack of academic foundational skills. These skills, such as prerequisite knowledge from linked courses, were needed in order to keep up with the rigor and pacing of the classes. These feelings were based on teachers' preconceived notions of their students before those students were given the opportunity to acclimate into the Advanced Placement program. African American male participants talked about how this led some of their friends to either voluntarily exit the program or be forced out due to the demands of the program.

There were issues plaguing the Advanced Placement program. These issues arose from the image of Advanced Placement from those within the teaching ranks. Because of constraints on the master schedule, often students were faced with course conflicts between Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. In order to advance within the program, students found themselves possibly needing courses that were offered at the same time. This led to one program, International Baccalaureate, having more prestige than Advanced Placement. Teachers frequently talked about not seeing any push from counselors or administration for students to enroll in Advanced Placement, although it was a great program for students. They also noted that they do not have a dedicated Advanced Placement coordinator on their campus like the International Baccalaureate program has. These factors created a culture of belief amongst staff in the Advanced Placement program that the International Baccalaureate program is the better of the two programs offered at the high school.

According to the findings, there were some practices that stunted growth of African American males and the Advanced Placement program. The curriculum and how it influenced

the AP exams was a concern for both students and educators. From the students' standpoint, the curriculum was Eurocentric and did not advance the viewpoints of minority populations. As argued by Ford (1996) because of the lack of representation in the curriculum, African American males may experience a sense of alienation. This concern often led them to have to do outside research to fill in learning gaps. They felt they only wanted to learn enough to be successful on the Advanced Placement exam. No more, no less. Teachers also found themselves working under strict parameters, when analyzing the curriculum in order to ensure that students were prepared for the Advanced Placement exam. Information that might not be part of the Advanced Placement exam may be omitted due to the districts trimester structure and lack of time to cover additional material. This led to a perception by participants that the focus was on testing.

Hattie (2003) found that students taught by expert teachers exhibited an understanding of concepts that are more integrated, more coherent, and at a higher level of abstraction than students taught by other teachers. Although there were issues within the Advanced Placement program, providing teachers with opportunities to attain quality professional development was a priority for district administrators. This was done through district efforts and through teacher participation in College Board events. The main medium used to prepare participants to teach the rigor required for Advanced Placement was College Board's Advanced Placement Summer Institute. Although participants stated that there was not enough training in order for them to feel fully prepared to teach an Advanced Placement course, they did state that APSI gave them the best opportunity to be successful. Participants stated that they were encouraged by the district to attend APSI as many times as they elected to. However, participants said that only about 50% of Advanced Placement teachers consistently attended APSI. Teachers who were unable to consistently attend APSI would have the professional development gap filled in by

those who attended. Although not the same as attending, it provided those who were not able to attend an opportunity to be aligned with department teachers who attended. Participants also emphasized the need to have a teacher support system where they could share ideas and collaborate to meet the needs of their students across the area.

The major tenet of critical social theory that informed the theme of cultivating the Advanced Placement program was false consciousness. Fay (1987) defined false consciousness as the internalization of values, beliefs, and worldviews of the oppressors by the oppressed and their ability to willingly cooperate with those who oppress them in maintaining the social practices that end in their oppression. As stated earlier in the study, I interpreted false consciousness as the effect of the values and beliefs of educators, and even College Board, on the educational outcomes of African American males. The theme of cultivating the Advanced Placement program identified issues that were happening within the Advanced Placement program while outlining what academic characteristics were needed by African American males in order to succeed in the program.

Identifying Academic Shortcomings

From the findings a second emergent theme, identifying academic shortcomings, was revealed through the responses of the participant interviews. When looking at testing, there was a delicate balance between recruiting for the Advanced Placement program and sustaining test results. All students can benefit from the rigor of Advanced Placement courses (Talieferro & Decuir-Gunby, 2007). Although teachers stated that being in Advanced Placement was a great place for students to be, compared to on-level courses, they were also aware that they needed to prepare their students to be successful on the corresponding Advanced Placement exam. Advanced Placement's focus of preparing students for an end-of-year standardized test has

proven problematic in the age of anti-standardized testing (Schneider, 2009). From talking to

participants, program effectiveness was solely tied to how students performed on the Advanced

Placement test. Teachers whose students scored above the global average were awarded a

plaque by the district that signified that they had proven to be effective at preparing their students

for the exam and seeing them realize that success.

Ford (1995) pointed to a lack of teacher referrals as the number one reason historically

underrepresented students were under-referred for gifted and Advanced Placement programming.

This seemed to be confirmed when both educators and administrators talked about how students

were locked into their academic track long before they got to high school. This brought a focus

on who recommended students to gifted programming and what measures were being used to

recommend those students. Whiting and Ford (2009) stated that teachers and counselors are the

gatekeepers of gifted education and frequently under-refer Black students. Findings within the

study confirmed that teachers and counselors were the first contact for students looking to get

into gifted education, including Advanced Placement.

The lack of African American males within the Advanced Placement program is seen not

only by the teachers but also the students participating in the study. This issue was a systemic

problem that went back to early educational tracking. Because of wrong tracking, or teacher bias

in who gets tracked up, African American males found themselves on the wrong academic track.

Klopfenstein (2004) stated that students are less likely to participate in AP courses because they

lacked the preparation to perform college work in the high school setting. There was an

international influence, or African students, rather than African American students taking part in

the Advanced Placement program. This caused an identity crisis due to being in classrooms with

students and staff that do not look like them or relate to them. This was coupled with the fact

that African American males had a lack of support from staff within the educational system. Although there were not many students who look like them, they were able to forge relationships within their classes to support their needs to be successful within the Advanced Placement program.

Several factors were causing students to exit the Advanced Placement program. Due to demands of the program, most of them were based on practices employed by teachers. Summer assignments along with the amount of homework were at the top of the list of concerns of students and educators. These two expectations, staples of the Advanced Placement program, caused fatigue amongst students as they matriculated through the program. According to Schneider (2009), Advanced Placement was dramatically increasing the stress levels and workloads of those identified as academically gifted. This finding was in line with what participants iterated during the study. In order to avoid the onslaught of daily work, students would rather exit the Advanced Placement program and participate in on-level courses where the demands were less stringent. Also, there was a heavy emphasis on writing and reading within the Advanced Placement program. The writing demand was due to the writing component of the AP exams. In order to prepare students for extended writing demands, teachers were expecting their students to write more within their classroom settings. If this was the first time that students had been faced with these types of demands, the added pressure may have been the catalyst that caused students to look at other academic options.

Some aspects of the Advanced Placement program were categorized as educational gatekeeping. Often educators and administrators talked about how students were locked into their academic track long before they got to high school with few opportunities to transfer to an advanced track. Educational tracking was a problem that had been evoked by numerous scholars

such as Ford (1998) and Taliaferro and Decuir-Gunby (2008) who stated that African American males find themselves in lower educational settings due to perceived educational shortcomings. Often teachers/counselors are the gatekeepers and do not recommend Black students for screening and identification (Whiting & Ford, 2009). But there were still parameters that cannot be overlooked within the high school. One of the main methods used for gatekeeping was the Advanced Placement contract. This document imposed minimum grade requirements and restrictions on receiving weighted credit if students did not take the required Advanced Placement exam for their course. Students were also subject to removal if they violated the terms of the contract. Because of the lack of equity in the Advanced Placement contract, teachers often used their own personal discretion about how to use the Advanced Placement contract in a way that was equitable for all. Often teachers opted to use the Advanced Placement contract as a final means to remove a student from the program after multiple attempts at intervention.

Utilizing the same identification measures serviced through English/Language Arts to identify all students for gifted and talented led to students going unidentified and being placed on the wrong academic track. Ford (1995) identified lack of teacher referral, poor test performance, and student choice as the primary factors associated with underidentification of gifted African American students. There was also a problem within the district with how many indicators that schools used in order to identify a student for gifted and talented. Some elementary schools within the district identified students if they qualified with 2 of 3 measures. Other elementary schools within the district required that students qualified for 3 of 3 measures. Necessary corrections were being made within the advanced academic office to ensure that identification

measures were equitable across the district and that services were used in other academic areas such as the math department.

The major tenet of critical social theory that informed the theme of identifying academic shortcomings was crisis. According to Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) crises considered within the public education system are likely to have been manufactured by systems of oppression. I defined the tenet of crisis as those structures that were in place to impede the forward progress of African American males within the Advanced Placement program. The theme of academic shortcomings identified factors that continued to perpetuate a tiered educational system that often found African American males locked out of key educational opportunities that could lead to higher academic outcomes.

Supporting the Needs of Students

The findings revealed a third emergent theme, supporting the needs of students. This theme was evident throughout the analysis of the focus group interview and the individual face-to-face interviews. Student and parental supports at the school were key to ensuring that African American males were engaged in their educational settings. Although parents might not be as active or visible at the high school, they were encouraging their students at home to achieve academic excellence. Supporting their students from home aligned with Ford and Moore (2013) who said African American families are usually concerned about the academic attainment of their boys but sometimes lack the educational, social, fiscal, or cultural capital to assist them. Parental support coupled with teacher and counselor support helped guide African American males along the Advanced Placement path.

Counselors play a vital role in creating a supportive and inclusive environment where students can thrive and gifted African American males can excel (Henfield et al., 2014).

Taliaferro and Decuir-Gunby (2008) found that when students feel supported by their teachers, they are more likely to feel a sense of connection to school and are more likely to be academically successful. African American male participants talked about the need to have teachers who were caring and trustworthy and were advocates to their cause. Knowing that they had the support needed at school led to a positive feeling overall. Teacher interventions, whether it was through a critical conversation or an encouraging word, were seen as part of the reason that African American male student participants continued on their academic track. Students also took notice of bad teachers who they felt were simply there to be mean to students. The student participants talked about avoiding these teachers when selecting courses.

In the literature, Noguera (2003) stated how students' socioeconomic or ethnic background governs how students are perceived and treated by adults within an educational environment. The principal set the tone that the voice of minority populations would be recognized. He did this through the use of minority focus groups and the principal advisory committee. By embracing the district's continuous improvement model, communication with stakeholders within the high school and the community helped to identify needs within the school. By involving those who normally are marginalized in the educational system, an environment that is inclusive of all will hopefully be realized. This idea of culturally responsive leadership was seen throughout the study. Participants talked about how the principal conducted implicit bias training with the staff that sought to address how particular populations within the school were seen. The goal for teachers was to take ownership of their own biases when dealing with those who do not look like them. When teachers addressed their implicit bias head on, they were less likely to operate from a deficit-thinking mindset. Ford and Moore III (2013) defined

deficit thinking as fueling and feeding prejudicial and often unfounded beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of others of different ethnic groups.

There were practices happening within the district that were positive. These areas included the focus on finding hidden gems and looking for opportunities for students to be successful within the Advanced Placement program. Participants expressed the need to give students an opportunity to acclimate to the demands of the Advanced Placement program. By letting students get their feet under them, students were less likely to bail out in an effort to escape the demands of the program. This was also the approach taken when providing services to students that were deemed highly capable. By extending services to highly capable students alongside gifted and talented students, those who were able to perform at a high level were granted the gifted and talented identification. The district was also looking at ways to get more students to take part in Advanced Placement through classes that did not require prerequisite courses. These courses included Art History, Computer Science Principles, and most of the history courses offered by College Board. By taking this approach, students who would normally be locked out of Advanced Placement due to early educational experiences were afforded an opportunity at taking college level coursework.

Davis, Davis, and Mobley (2013) found in a study that misidentification of African American students in early educational settings leads to underrepresentation in advanced academic programs later. The need for early identification at the elementary level was seen as a key means to correct the lack of African American males within the Advanced Placement program. Educators talked about the need to send letters to parents of students who showed academic excellence in order to encourage them to take advanced academic courses in the 5th and 6th grade. By allowing more students to be identified earlier, students who would normally be

misidentified or overlooked would have the opportunity to be placed on a track that would be academically challenging and that sets them up for post-secondary educational success.

The major tenet of critical social theory that informed the theme of supporting the needs of students was education. Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) defined the tenet of education as the teaching and learning that takes place in any social group, not just formal schooling. I defined education as the interactions between all stakeholders, including educators, African American male students, and parents, which lead to positive academic outcomes within the Advanced Placement program. This shaped the theme of supporting the needs of students by highlighting the need for communication between all stakeholders, along with a need for early identification for gifted education program and teacher/counselor support systems.

<center>Addressing Invisible African American Males</center>

Findings from this study revealed a fourth emergent theme, addressing invisible African American males. This theme was frequently referenced by administration, teachers, and the African American male students during their interviews. Participants, including African American male students, noticed that there were not many African American males within the Advanced Placement program, yet they acknowledged that there was international representation. I defined this to mean that Black males within the program were African rather than African American. This is due to the importance of education within the immigrant family structure for upward mobility. But the lack of African American males within the Advanced Placement program has led to a lack of awareness by educators of the emotional struggles of African American males. These students felt largely isolated in a program that they saw as not meant for them.

Representation matters in order to weed out common stereotypes associated with African

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American males. These stereotypes have led to African American males becoming largely

invisible in the Advanced Placement program. Minority teachers would serve as positive role

models or mentors to minority students considering enrollment in Advanced Placement courses

(Klopfenstein, 2004). Not only did students see themselves as being able to thrive in Advanced

Placement courses, educators stated that African American males exhibited the traits, such as

being hard workers and being self-motivated, needed in order to be successful. In order to be

successful within the Advanced Placement program, African American males expressed a need

to maintain a diverse circle of peers and to see their environment from the viewpoint of others.

Because African American males were involved in multiple activities on campus, participants

were aware of time management concerns and talked about the need to stay focused and driven.

Ogbu (2004) stated that African American males would rather disengage from their

academic setting to fit in with their peers. The findings from the focus group interview actually

proved the opposite. African American male participants actually embraced their academic

skillset and attempted to bring their peers along. If their peers did not choose to join them in the

Advanced Placement program, they walked the path alone. They still associated with those

peers, but they did not sacrifice their giftedness in order to maintain social status. The need for

African American male students to balance both worlds was actually in line with a study

conducted by Allen (2015), where African American males consciously balanced academic

ability and being cool while meeting the academic expectations of their parents.

African American males also fought the stereotype of being labeled the gifted or smart

kid or just the athlete. Participants saw this as counterproductive to their efforts to be successful.

Mcgee (2013) found that young Black males often respond to negative stereotypes with their

own coping mechanisms to reduce the impact of the stereotypes. Or they respond to the thought

that outside commitments were more important than academics when those commitments caused scheduling conflicts. These stereotypes, along with cultural barriers discussed in the literature review, have hindered African American males from realizing their potential at a higher level.

Retention woes, specifically with African American males, were going unchecked within the Advanced Placement program. This is in line with Ford and Moore (2013) who found that African American males are less likely than all other students to participate in Advanced Placement, gifted education, or honors classes. Most of the participants in the interviews talked about how there were no measures in place to monitor recruiting and retention of African American males within the Advanced Placement program. Because there were no plans in place, the lack of African American males within the Advanced Placement program largely goes unquestioned. There has been no push toward ensuring that minority populations, particularly African American males, were represented in the Advanced Placement program, so some educators feel that it is not a priority for administration at the district or school levels.

Addressing parental engagement was key for educators and administrators in getting African American males involved in the Advanced Placement program. Studies by Muller (1998) and Seyfried and Chung (2002) found that parental involvement played a major role in student academic achievement. Often, administrators talked about the obligations of parents that took them out of their student's educational circle. Yet African American male students talked about how their parents might not be in the building advocating for them, but they were definitely encouraging them from home to achieve to their highest potential while being part of the Advanced Placement program. Educator interviews also pointed out the fact that parents were more involved in the academic careers of their African American male students in the Advanced Placement program compared to those students in on-level classes. This seemed to be

in line with Klopfenstein (2004) who found that well-educated parents provided the academic support that their children needed in order to be successful. As evidenced by multiple African American male students, parents were also the ones who planted the seed to be part of the Advanced Placement program. The advanced academics department also utilized the district website to inform parents of what options their students had once they entered the advanced academic program. The presentation on the district website informed parents about what they could do to support the needs of their student. So having supportive parents who partner with educators to meet the needs of African American male students was crucial in realizing academic success within the Advanced Placement program.

The major tenet of critical social theory that informed the theme of addressing invisible African American males was transformative action. Freeman and Vasconcelos (2010) defined transformative action as the alteration and actions needed in order to resolve the identified crisis. I defined transformative action as the actions needed in order for African American males to gain equitable opportunities within the Advanced Placement program. This shaped the theme of addressing invisible African American males by identifying and responding to African American male stereotypes nurturing the Black male identity, and proactively looking for ways to increase participation of African American males in the Advanced Placement program.

<center>Implications for Action</center>

The results of this study provide an in-depth list of best practices for creating equitable advanced academic opportunities for African American males. The recommendations that emerged as a result of this study are (1) creating a recruitment/retainment plan for African American males in the Advanced Placement program; (2) analyzing identification measures used for giftedness along with identifying students early in their educational careers for giftedness; (3)

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evaluating the amount of summer assignments and daily work that students must complete to avoid burnout; (4) furthering cultural proficiency training past just implicit bias training for leaders and teachers; (5) ensuring that the Advanced Placement program is vertically aligned from elementary through high school and has just as much prestige as the International Baccalaureate program; (6) hiring a dedicated Advanced Placement program coordinator; (7) hiring male teachers of color, preferably African American males, to serve as Advanced Placement educators and mentors to African American male students.

In order to increase the number of African American males taking part in the Advanced Placement program, it is imperative that a system-wide plan for retention/retainment be drafted in order to combat systemic inequities. System-wide measures meant to maintain excellence within the Advanced Placement program, such as the Advanced Placement contract and the qualifying exams, ultimately serve as artificial barriers for students and stunt academic growth. Even the construction of the master schedule has contributed to systemic inequities. The development of an equity policy should be put into place in order to combat low enrollment of African American males within the Advanced Placement program. Due to the demands already placed on teachers, it is important to understand that this plan cannot rest on their backs. The first step of this plan is to meet with the district advanced academics coordinator to ensure that the district is implementing identification measures that take into account the backgrounds of all learners. Identifying measures should not be limited to aptitude, STAAR scores, and grades. Elementary teachers and counselors must then be trained for the program that the district will use and be consistent with the characteristics for identifying African American male students for the advanced academic programs.

The second step involves the high school Advanced Placement coordinator working with

the counselors at the feeder junior high schools to monitor the number of African American males taking part in the Advanced Placement program. This number should be proportionate to the number of African American males within the district. If this number is not proportionate, measures must be taken to identify African American males who exhibit traits that will lead to success within the Advanced Placement program. African American males who attempt to exit the program must meet with both his parents and the counselor to identify support measures that they have not tapped into. Support measures could include study groups, mandatory tutoring schedules, and peer mentoring, etc. This information must be documented and communicated with the high school Advanced Placement coordinator who will then follow up with the student to check on effectiveness of these measures. At the end of the year, the high school Advanced Placement coordinator must meet with the counselors of the feeder junior high schools and African American male students to identify those students who are advancing to the high school. This meeting serves to inform African American males of what their next classes will be within the Advanced Placement chain, which should not be optional, and to identify key individuals to access once at the high school.

The third step involves the high school Advanced Placement coordinator working with the high school counselors/teachers and African American males to maintain excellence within the Advanced Placement program. This includes setting up focus group meetings with Advanced Placement teachers and African American males to monitor the climate of the AP program. These meetings will serve to identify what measures are working for African American males and what measures need improvement within the program such as adjustments to summer assignments and workload placed on students. Just like at the junior high level, the Advanced Placement coordinator will monitor the number of African American males taking

part in the program and implement retention measures when necessary. This information will then be documented and relayed to the district advanced academics coordinator for further analysis.

District-wide initiatives include ensuring that advanced academics are aligned from elementary through junior high and culminating at the high school as well as providing cultural proficiency training. Teachers not only have to set high expectations, but they also have to provide supports that ensure that African American males reach those expectations. This also means that teachers must meet in clusters between the grade levels to ensure that they know what their students need to learn in order to be successful in the next grade level. This vertical alignment, coupled with the need to be familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the students who are coming to their grade level, will help them plan effective instruction.

Cultural proficiency training needs to go further than implicit bias training. A culture assessment must be completed at all three levels of the district to determine a course of action. From there, staff must meet with students and community members to establish common ground. This has to be a safe environment for all stakeholders to share without judgment. From these discussions, appropriate means of communication and common vocabulary must be established that will be implemented throughout the district. Because they are not currently being used, equity agreements between educators and students would be the next step. Conflict resolution strategies that take into account all cultures and backgrounds will be key to lowering the number of discipline infractions while identifying appropriate examples that value cultural differences to use within the classroom. The ultimate goal of these efforts is creating internalized beliefs that all students are valued and can succeed.

As detailed above, having a dedicated Advanced Placement coordinator is imperative to

making this plan work. Having an administrator with other duties will not work due to the amount of time that will be necessary for coordinating, monitoring, and documenting students in the Advanced Placement program over multiple grade levels. In my eyes, if deployed correctly, this position will be paramount in the efforts to ensure that African American males are represented within the Advanced Placement program. Currently, the position of Advanced Placement coordinator is being served by an assistant principal weighed down by other duties. A dedicated coordinator could not only advocate for students at all levels but could also research and implement forward thinking strategies while staying up-to-date with College Board initiatives.

The scope of this study was limited to the examination of one public high school within a North Texas school district. Although some of the findings were fleshed out in the literature, results of the study cannot be generalized due to the small sample size. My goal in conducting this study was to offer district administrators and campus leaders suggestions and recommendations they could utilize in order to create an environment within the Advanced Placement program where African American males could see sustained success. My hope was to provide a microphone for African American males within the educational site to express their voice on what it truly is like to be Black and high achieving in the school's Advanced Placement program. Their testimonies, coupled with the narratives of teachers within the educational system, provided a blueprint that could possibly illuminate policies and practices that will increase and sustain enrollment of African American males within the Advanced Placement program. The following section details recommendations for future research.

<center>Recommendations for Future Research</center>

Findings from this study provided a brief glimpse of the beliefs of district and campus

leaders and students within a single educational site about creating equity within the Advanced

Placement program. Although the knowledge gained was informative, due to the small sample

size of participants, the study was limited. A broader study with more participants could lead to

further investigations regarding students participation in the pre-Advanced Placement program at

the feeder junior high schools and program effectiveness at preparing students to matriculate into

the Advanced Placement program implemented at the subsequent high school. Additionally, the

addition of surveys to assess the effectiveness of the Advanced Placement program could be

utilized for all students and parents at the high school setting. Information gathered from these

surveys could better inform decisions by district and campus administrators regarding the

Advanced Placement program.

This study could be expanded beyond its current scope in numerous ways. First, this

study could be replicated and extended to include other high schools within the district as well as

in neighboring school districts. The current study examined only one school district. I believe

that the findings may be transferable to neighboring school districts with similar demographics

and profiles, but I believe that it would be beneficial to see how the results would compare to

districts that do not share the same demographics. More specifically, a comparison of Advanced

Placement programs across multiple high schools throughout the North Texas area and how

district and campus leaders are creating equitable opportunities for African American males

would be beneficial.

Implications for Practice

In a study by Ford and Moore (2013), they found that African American families have a

greater chance of feeling disenfranchised and discounted by school personnel which leads to

lower participation rates in advanced academic programming. Another opportunity to continue

this research would be to include the parent perspective and to identify supportive practices that provide parents with opportunities to assist African American males navigate their advanced academic opportunities from junior high through high school. Parents could be asked prior to their students beginning the advanced academics track about their expectations of the Advanced Placement program and what they need in order to support the success of their students. Sample research questions used to guide this addition to the study might include the following: What is the parent's opinion of the Advanced Placement program? What are the parents' needs in regards to supporting the needs of the student in the Advanced Placement program? Parents could also complete surveys at multiple checkpoints in the student's academic career in advanced academics. Parents could also receive specific training from the district about how to support their student's academic and social and emotional needs. These additions to the research could supplement the current study and provide additional validity to the findings.

Implications for Research

The current study could also be extended to include a longitudinal approach to the research. One option would be to follow a group of sixth grade students over time and examine their progress through the advanced academics track. The participant sample could be African American males transitioning to the junior high from multiple elementary campuses and tracked through high school. In a comparative study, the question could be asked: Were there any differences between African American males matriculating through the advanced academics track from the different elementary schools?

Thinking cross-curricular, it would be extremely informative to see how arts education, such as performing and visual arts, plays a part in the lives of African American males who take part in advanced academic programming. It is well known within the state of Texas that

individuals who take part in the Texas Music Educator Association All-State Performing Ensembles score, on average, higher than the general student population on ACT and SAT standardized testing. Looking into the connection between arts education and advanced academics for African American males could be just as informative as this study.

Finally, it would be important to evaluate the implications of African American males who decide to depart the Advanced Placement program. What are the motivating factors that cause African American males to leave the Advanced Placement program? What additional supports could have been implemented in order to keep those African American males enrolled in the advanced academic program?

Summary

The findings of this exploratory qualitative case study revealed what district and school policies and practices created or hindered equitable advanced academics opportunities for African American males. The high school selected had an ethnically diverse student population with a high number of minority students taking part in the Advanced Placement program evidenced by the district being named to the College Board 9th Annual AP District Honor Roll. This particular high school was selected for the study due to having a principal and staff that sought understanding as to why African American males were not enrolling in the Advanced Placement program. Three areas of the educational site, including district policy, leadership, and the Advanced Placement program, were analyzed through the lens of critical social theory. The findings from this study were significant due to substantial overlap throughout the individual face-to-face interviews with educators, the focus group interview with African American male students, and district documents. In addition, the themes revealed during the interviews aligned with the research findings of the literature review. It is possible that schools that are facing the

same dilemma of limited numbers of African American males in their Advanced Placement

program may benefit from replicating the policies and practices identified in this study.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me to discuss the AP program and student supports at your school. The purpose of my doctoral study is to explore equitable opportunities for African American males in advanced academic programs.

Before we begin, I want to ask you to respond to a few statements indicating your understanding or agreement.

First, I would like to audio record this interview in order to ensure all information is accurate. Do I have your permission to record this interview? If you consent, please initial the informed consent form. I also want to assure you that your name, the name of this school, and the names of teachers, students, and other personnel of this school will not be used anywhere in this research. When appropriate, pseudonyms will be used. Do you have any questions about that?

At this time I will review the consent form in order for you to participate in this interview.

Do you have any questions about the consent form or this research? Are you a willing participant in this research and interview? Do you understand that this interview should take between 60-90 minutes but that you may stop the interview at any time?

1. Can you please describe your educational and professional experiences to date? (Background)

2. Please describe the purpose of the Advanced Placement program? (Background)

3. What role and responsibilities do you have in the AP program? (RQ1A)

4. Can you describe the student demographics in the AP program? Probe: Is the diversity reflective of the general student population? (RQ1)

5. Please describe the role of district/campus leaders in the planning and implementation of the AP program? (RQ1A)

   Probe: Can you describe the process for recruitment and retention of students?

6. Please describe district and/or school policies that are applicable to the advanced academics program? (RQ1)

7. What type of and for whom is professional learning offered for the advanced academics program? Probes: Is professional learning comprehensive and sequential? Is it tailor- made for the needs of each school? (RQ1A)

8. Please share district or school efforts to recruit and retain students of color, and African American male students in particular, to AP courses? (RQ1B) Probe: What are district and school leaders' expectations toward this endeavor and how are those expectations communicated to teachers?

9. What problems have you seen in the recruitment and retention of African American males in the program? Probe: How do these challenges compare to students from other demographic groups? (RQ1B)

10. How does the district and/or school assess the effectiveness of their AP program in recruiting and retaining students? (RQ1)

11. What do you see as the district's next steps in supporting schools in recruiting and retaining African American males and other students of color? (RQ1B)

12. Is there anything else you feel I should know or someone else you think I should speak to who would support the purpose of my study?

Thank you for your time today. This interview will be transcribed and analyzed. Once completed, I will ask you to verify the accuracy of my interpretation of your responses. If you don't mind, would you be available to answer any questions by email or phone call should they arise?

APPENDIX B

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The purpose of my doctoral study is to explore equitable opportunities for African American males in advanced academic programs. As an African American male administrator, I value your opinion and want to hear about your experiences, the successes and the challenges. This focus group session will be audio recorded so that it may be transcribed later. Each participant will be given a number to state prior to responding to questions. This is to help in maintaining confidentiality of participants. To begin, I want to frame our discussion today by starting with a video created by The College Board on "The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color." Take a second to gather your thoughts, and then tell me what comes to mind after watching the video. Again, please state your participant number prior to responding to a question or making a statement.

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yA_kpQJ_Vm8

Questions:

1. How did the school recruit you to be part of the Advanced Placement program? (RQ1)
    a. Probe: What role did your parents play? (RQ1B)
    b. Probe: What did you do to prepare yourself for the rigor of Advanced Placement courses? (RC1B)
    c. As an African American male, describe your experiences in Advanced Placement courses. Probe: As an African American male, describe your relationships with school leaders and teachers. (RQ1A)
    d. How is the learning in an Advanced Placement course relevant to your culture as an African American male? (RQ1)
    e. What is one piece of advice you would give to school leaders and teachers that would enhance your experience as an African American male in the Advanced Placement program? (RQ1B)
2. Is there anything else you feel I should know or someone else you think I should speak to that would support the purpose of my study?

Thank you for participating in this interview. Your responses will remain confidential and your identity will be anonymous.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR TEACHERS

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me to discuss the AP program and student supports at your school. The purpose of my doctoral study is to explore equitable opportunities for African American males in advanced academic programs.

Before we begin, I want to ask you to respond to a few statements indicating your understanding or agreement.

First, I would like to audio record this interview in order to ensure all information is accurate. Do I have your permission to record this interview? If you consent, please initial the informed consent form. I also want to assure you that your name, the name of this school, and the names of teachers, students, and other personnel of this school will not be used anywhere in this research. When appropriate, pseudonyms will be used. Do you have any questions about that?

At this time I will review the consent form in order for you to participate in this interview.

Do you have any questions about the consent form or this research? Are you a willing participant in this research and interview? Do you understand that this interview should take between 60-90 minutes but that you may stop the interview at any time?

1. Can you please describe your educational and professional experiences to date? (Background)

2. Please describe the purpose of the Advanced Placement program? (Background)

3. What role and responsibilities do you have within the AP program? (Background)

4. Can you describe the student demographics in the AP program? Probe: Is the diversity reflective of the general student population? (RQ1)

5. Please describe the role of district/campus leaders in the planning and implementation of the AP program? (RQ1A)

   Probe: Can you describe the process for recruitment and retention of students?

6. Please describe district and/or school policies that are applicable to the advanced academic program? (RQ1)

7. What school-based initiatives have been put into place that targets the recruitment and retainment of students of color, particularly African American males, and their families? (RQ1A)

   a. How explicit is the school in addressing outreach for underrepresented groups?

   b. Please provide examples. What qualities do you look for when recruiting students into the AP program?

   c. Probes: Do you believe all students can be successful in AP coursework? Why, why not?

8. What problems have you seen in the recruitment and retention of African American males in the program? Probe: How do these challenges compare to students from other demographic groups? (RQ1B)

9. Please share district or school efforts to recruit and retain students of color, and African American male students in particular, to AP courses? (RQ1B) Probe: What are district and school leaders' expectations toward this endeavor and how are those expectations communicated to teachers?

10. What type of and for whom is professional learning offered for the advanced academic program? Probes: Is professional learning comprehensive and sequential? Is it tailor- made for the needs of each school? (RQ1A)

11. What are the greatest pitfalls for diverse students who struggle? (RQ1B)

    a. Probe: Do you believe those struggles can be addressed and remedied? Why or why not?

    b. Probe: Do you believe diverse students are prepared for or informed about those struggles ahead of time? Why or why not?

    c. Probe: Do you believe African American males struggle more than their White peers? Why do you believe that?

12. What protocols do you use in order to identify struggling students? (RQ1A)

13. How does the district and/or school assess the effectiveness of the AP program in recruiting and retaining students? (RQ1)

14. What do you see as the district's next steps in supporting schools in recruiting and retaining African American males and other students of color? (RQ1B)

15. Is there anything else you feel I should know or someone else you think I should speak to who would support the purpose of my study?

Thank you for your time today. This interview will be transcribed and analyzed. Once completed, I will ask you to verify the accuracy of my interpretation of your responses. If you don't mind, would you be available to answer any questions by email or phone call should they arise?

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