STUDENT AND FAMILY PERSPECTIVES ON GIFTED AND ADVANCED ACADEMICS

PARTICIPATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Karen Zeske

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2015

APPROVED:

Mary Harris, Major Professor
Michael Sayler, Committee Member
Jeanne Tunks, Committee Member
Bertina Combes, Committee Member
James Laney, Chair of the Department of Teacher Education and Administration
Jerry Thomas, Dean of College of Education
Costas Tsatsoulis, Interim Dean of Toulouse Graduate School
Zeske, Karen. *Student and family perspectives on gifted and advanced academics participation for African American high school students.* Doctor of Philosophy (Curriculum and Instruction), August 2015, 239 pp., 7 tables, references, 139 titles.

Many students and their families do not understand the impact of students’ involvement in gifted or advanced academics educational programs and their potentially positive effects and challenges. Nationally African American students are underrepresented in gifted and advanced academics courses in high schools; however, African American students and families often do not advocate for their inclusion in these educational pathways.

A survey of literature supporting this study of voices of African American families concerning gifted and advanced academics participation focused on (1) the historical underpinnings for equity and excellence for African American and for gifted and advanced academics learners, (2) how the lack of an agreed upon definition of gifted and advanced academics by the professional field might contribute to the problem, and (3) how African American parents made educational decisions for and with their children, especially concerning college. Employing semi-structured interviews and a focus group, this qualitative case study examined how four students from each of three groups, gifted and talented, advanced academics, and neither, and a representative group of their parents perceived these programs and their children’s involvement in them within the framework provided by a single school district.

African American families in this study asked for a partnership to support their children in building resiliency to choose and remain in gifted and advanced academics programs. Students reported that they could access more rigorous coursework if they were supported by mentoring peers, in addition to informed family and educators. The matching intonations and word choices
of the children and parents suggested academic success pathways as students carried the voices of their families with them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the people that I have met on this journey, your inspiring passion for children fuels my enthusiasm and hope for what we educators do every day. I am humbled by those who modeled true servant leadership and am grateful for the family members—real and fictive—who believed in my dream along with me. An everlasting thanks for love and support goes to these special people.

To my husband Mark, I cherish every day we have together as you understand my passion, drive, and dedication and sometimes simply get out of my way. You never say “no” to my crazy ideas. Thank you for carrying my torch as we act on our own tunnel lists with a train token in our pockets. To my children Jessica, Cliff, Jamie, Rebecca, David, and Luke, thank you for your inspiring examples and constant encouragement. To my grandchildren Emma, Juli, Ridley, and Rory, you remind me every day to provide opportunities for children so they can live and love as you do. I am ready to play! My parents and in laws never doubted me. I love you.

My colleagues and friends, especially Debbie George and Audra Rowell, shared encouragement, love, and effort as I juggled academic and work worlds for the last five years. To the teachers who shared my passion and helped in numerous ways, thank you.

My final thank goes to my steadfast and encouraging committee. Dr. Mary Harris, your targeted and straightforward advice buoyed me on more occasions that I can count. Thank you for your wisdom and the sacrifice of time. Dr. Jeanne Tunks, you guided and focused me when I had ideas that I did not know how to harness. Dr. Michael Sayler, your questioning and challenging what I thought I would do and what was possible helped me grow as a researcher. Dr. Bertina Combes, thank you for your insight, encouragement and interest in a topic worthy of study.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ........................................................................................................... iii

**LIST OF TABLES** ......................................................................................................................... ix

**CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION** ................................................................................................. 1

  A Philosophical Framework of Justice ........................................................................... 3

  Statement of the Problem ................................................................................................ 5

  Purpose .................................................................................................................................... 5

  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 6

  Overview of the Approach to the Problem ................................................................. 6

  Definitions of Terms ....................................................................................................... 7

  Delimitations of the Study .............................................................................................. 8

  Limitations of the Study .................................................................................................. 9

  Summary of Chapter 1 .................................................................................................... 9

**CHAPTER 2  LITERATURE REVIEW** ...................................................................................... 11

  The Quest for Equity and Excellence for African American Students ......................... 11

    The Concurrent Progression of Civil Rights, Gifted, and Advanced Academics..... 11

    Lack of Excellence and Equity as a Concurrent Focus........................................... 16

    African Americans Have Been Excluded ................................................................. 19

    Impact of the Lack of a Universal Definition ........................................................... 21
Family Decision-making in Middle and High School .......................................................... 32
Role of Families in Education and College Readiness ..................................................... 32
Influence of Culture on Decision-making ........................................................................ 34
Barriers to Decision-making for Gifted and Advanced Academics .............................. 37
What African American Families Know about Academic Decision-making ............... 39
Summary of Chapter 2 ................................................................................................. 41

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .............................................................................................. 42
Case Study Design ......................................................................................................... 43
Theoretical Methodology ............................................................................................... 44
Recruiting Participants ................................................................................................. 50
Data Sources ................................................................................................................ 51
Data Collection Procedures .......................................................................................... 53
Summary of Chapter 3 ................................................................................................. 63

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS ...................................................................................................... 64
The study posed the following questions: ....................................................................... 64
Introduction of Groups 1, 2, and 3 .............................................................................. 65
Differences among GT/Pre-AP/AP/General Education Programs .............................. 68
Turning Challenges into Success .................................................................................. 87
Focus on the Future: College and Career ..................................................................... 96
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .......................................................... 178

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted Program Access and Implementation</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Program Access and Implementation</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Network Support</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-AP as Preparation for AP</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-way Communication</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Advocacy</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Considerations</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Practice</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Access</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Implementation</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Network Support</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-AP as Preparation for AP</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information for Families</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-way Communication</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Advocacy</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

1. Percentages of Students and Gifted Students in Apple Creek ISD by Ethnicity (2012-2013) ........................................................................................................................................3

2. Milestones in the Parallel History of Civil Rights and Gifted Education ..................................12

3. Student Participants with School Grade and Indicator of Parent Participants .........................51

4. Themes and Sub-Themes by Student Group ...........................................................................68

5. Characteristics of Group 1 Students .........................................................................................71

6. Characteristics of Group 2 Students .........................................................................................72

7. Characteristics of Group 3 Students .........................................................................................73
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Participation of African American (AA) Students in school offering gifted and Advanced Placement—March 2014.................................................................21

2. Relationship of advanced academics, gifted, pre-AP, and AP...............................28
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The percentages of African American students in gifted and advanced academics courses nationally do not match those of students in general, and much research literature has reflected the views of educators about reasons for these discrepancies (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Siegle, Zhang, & Chen, 2005; Coleman, 2003; Conley, 2005; Conley, 2010; Corra, Carter, & Carter, 2011; Davis, 2010; Ford, 2010b; Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Hopkins & Garrett, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler, 2009; Worrell, 2007). Studies on this topic that take into account the viewpoints of families and students together are scarce. Much research has explored why African American students succeed or fail (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Siegle, Zhang, & Chen, 2005; Coleman, 200; Corra, Carter, & Carter, 2011; Davis, 2010; Ford, 2010b; Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; VanTassel-Baska, 2010; Worrell, 2007), but few studies have focused on how those students who were successful built the resiliency associated with sustained participation in gifted and advanced academics programs and what prevented others from doing so. Again, the research on student performance offered few combined student and family member voices. For a firmly established system of gifted and advanced academic programs to change in consideration of the needs of African American children, the voices of the children and their families must be considered. Absent such research, the direction of information regarding how to help African American students succeed in gifted and advanced academics will continue its flow from school to community. For more African American children to take their places in gifted and advanced academic programs, more sharing needs to move from the community to the school.
Parents and community members were important participants in supporting historically underserved students, especially African American students. Historically gifted and advanced academics programs have included African American children, but the participation rate has been inequitable. Davis (2010), Ford (2010b), Hopkins & Garrett (2010) promoted an accessible school environment and a culturally relevant curriculum as the means for improving learning, noting that the one-size-fits-all approach had not served either the gifted nor the advanced academic African American students in our schools. Fitting school to the children from local communities necessitated some interaction with those communities. The need and desire of the parent and school partnership emerged from these studies.

The call for justice in education is more than 50 years old. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked the beginning of a formalized, legal relationship between civil rights and education. The Act of 1964 banned using race, nationality, or sex to discriminate against and segregate students. Equal opportunities in education were an intended part of this anti-discrimination effort. From 1965 to the present, a series of laws and rulings gradually directed that the nation’s schools eliminate segregation and discrimination (Find Law, 2013; Zinn, 2003). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) enabled the federal government to influence PK-12 education and its impact since its inception and subsequent reauthorizations, through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), has been profound. Title 1 of ESEA, a part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, and the public’s reaction to it, emerged as significant, sustained influences on public education. At the same time, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed literacy tests as prerequisites for voting, Malcolm X influenced, and Martin Luther King died in resistance to the conditions that necessitated the Voting Rights Act. In 1971, Thurgood Marshall wrote and led

Even with the historical progression of ESEA, The Civil Rights Act, NCLB, and gifted and advanced academics education, some schools and school districts today still lack the representative participation of historically underrepresented populations in gifted and advanced academics programs. Achievement, opportunity, and excellence gaps have persisted for some students, and especially for native-born African American children.

For the purposes of context and to emphasize that the injustice for African American students is not a problem only in ACISD, Table 1, shows similar demographic trends for Texas populations.

Table 1

Percentages of Students and Gifted Students in Apple Creek ISD by Ethnicity (2012-2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>% ACISD</th>
<th>% in Gifted ACISD</th>
<th>% Texas Population</th>
<th>% Gifted in Texas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>16.98</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Am.</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Am.</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A Philosophical Framework of Justice

The philosophical underpinning of this study was the concept of justice. Rawls (1971) presented principles of justice centered on equality and fairness that should “regulate all further agreements” such as social cooperation and establishing government. He termed this approach
“justice as fairness” (p. 8). “Justice as fairness” suggested that justice could exist only if the situation were fair to begin with (Rawls, 1971). A philosophical lens of justice was not new in the 20th century. Plato and Aristotle promoted justice in philosophical teachings, and justice had been an integral force in American philosophy since its inception including the intent to “establish justice” in the Preamble to the Constitution and in Madison’s The Federalist Papers #51. The foundational belief that “justice should be the goal of all government and of all civil society, that people are willing to risk even liberty in its pursuit” permeated the beginnings of a new United States of America (Pomerleau, 2015). The philosophy of justice similarly informed the Civil Rights Movement. Researchers who studied justice in U.S. schools (Davis, 2010; Ford, 2010b; Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Hopkins & Garrett, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler, 2009; Worrell, 2007) decried injustice toward gifted African American students. It was their contention that injustice continued to exist for native-born African American gifted students that framed this study. Singleton and Linton (2006) stated that “achieving true equity for all students must be a central and essential component of any attempt to close the racial achievement gap” (p. 46). To close that gap, African American children should have access to advanced coursework that would pave the way to successful college completion. Educators and communities could not continue to sacrifice the minds and the futures of historically unrepresented gifted and advanced academic students. The recognition that children were both individuals and part of an ethnic and cultural group was important and created “a need to design a series of experiences to facilitate their acculturation into the gifted culture without denial or loss of the uniqueness of the other cultures to which each student belong[ed]” (Kaplan, 2011, p. 65).
Oakes (2003) educational model of equity was adapted by Oseguera (2013) and entitled adapted model of Oakes’ seven critical conditions for equity. This model employed three focuses in the quest for equity. Focus 1 was on high quality academic instruction of rigorous curriculum with qualified teachers, and in safe and adequate school facilities. Focus 2 elicited a school-based commitment to college access, emphasizing a college-going culture and intensive academic and social support to “enable students to negotiate the academic pipeline” (Oseguera, 2013, p. 2). The third focus of the seven critical conditions for equity was a shared responsibility for college access and choices including nurturing a multicultural college-going identity and family-neighborhood-school connections (Oseguera, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Both equity and excellence for African American students have increased since 1954 (Sparks, 2014), with more African American students enrolled in gifted and Advanced Placement (AP) courses than in previous years. But the percentage of participation of African Americans compared to the demographics of public schools has remained inequitable (Sparks, 2014).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to listen to the perspectives of small samples of African American students and family members of students who had chosen to participate in gifted and advanced academics and those who had not, with the intention to understand the perspectives of students and their families regarding gifted and advanced academics participation. A second purpose was to ascertain how to help educators create successful partnerships to support African American students in gifted and advanced academics courses.
Research Questions

1. What were the perspectives of native-born African American participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?

2. What were the perspectives of native-born African American family members of participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?

3. How did the perspectives of these students and family members align with one another?

Overview of the Approach to the Problem

This study used a multiple case study design. Findings from previous studies showed that a disconnect existed when comparing enrollment of African American high school students in general to those African American students enrolled in gifted and advanced academic programs. The urban district in the study had an underrepresentation of African American learners in gifted and advanced academics, which was the reason for this researcher’s choosing this school district. Qualitative methods for collecting data emphasized the ways that actions and narratives intersected (Glesne, 2011). A qualitative data collection methodology that amassed experiences from the past and present was an appropriate methodology for studying reasons this inequity for African American students persists. The qualitative data collection methods included the following: semi-structured interviews, a focus group, a questionnaire, and research observations and notes from 12 students and 7 family members from each of three groups. The groups consisted of the following students: gifted and talented/advanced placement (GT/AP) (Group 1), AP (Group 2), and neither GT nor AP (Group 3). Data from parents of all three groups were also collected. The multiple case study design allowed the researcher to compare data within and across groups.
Using a grounded theory approach to guide data collection and analysis enabled the researcher to take an inductive approach for the study. The “open, emergent nature of qualitative inquiry” (Glesne, 2011, p. 25), coupled with the grounded theory approach to analysis, enabled development of theory by analyzing the data collected. This open process fit the purpose of the study. The researcher sought to hear the stories of African American families in an urban Texas district in the hopes of uncovering data that would be useful in better serving the needs of African American students in gifted and advanced academics courses.

Definitions of Terms

The terms that follow were used in a particular way in this study and are defined here.

Family. Used in an attempt to be inclusive and includes parents or other adult caregivers who care for African American children.

A sustained participant. Any student who remained in AC ISD’s gifted and advanced academic classes and earned at least a 70 passing average for the school year.

Gifted courses. Courses that included special programming for which students were qualified on the basis of both qualitative and quantitative measures. In AC ISD students qualified with quantitative and qualitative measures with local norms (the top 10% of AC ISD scores) in grades K-3 and with 90% on an assessment with national norms in grades 4-12. Services included compacting of the curriculum and acceleration in math, science, English, and humanities.

Advanced academics. Courses that teach rigorous content beyond the minimum state standards of accountability and focus on advanced academic achievement such as pre-advanced placement (Pre-AP), and advanced placement (AP) and gifted and talented.
In AC ISD, Pre-AP and AP courses are vertically aligned, open access courses that are intended to teach students at the collegiate level within a certain academic discipline. AC ISD offered Pre-AP and AP courses to students who decided that they were prepared, passionate about the subject, and willing to complete the work. This definition is consistent with the College Board (2015) definition of successful participants in AP courses. Students could receive potential college credit by earning qualifying scores on the AP exams.

Native-born African American families. Families who had lived in America for multiple generations versus recent black immigrant families. This definition is consistent with Hernandez (2012).

Parent or family involvement. Parent or family participation in the education of children either at home or school. Involvement was not limited to physical presence in the school.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations include the researcher’s having chosen native-born African American communities and excluding immigrant African families. Researching only AC ISD families in a single district and using a qualitative approach to gathering data were also delimitations of the research design.

As a researcher, I wanted to hear the stories of these students and their families. I had an interest in this topic because of personal and professional ties to a school district that strove to rectify inequity in its schools. I had a personal history of poverty and knew that education had provided opportunities for me and my family. I wanted other young people to find a pathway to different futures if they wanted to impact their lives through education. In essence, I brought some personal bias of advocacy to the study, and this is a delimiting factor.
Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study included the sample size employed. While some researchers considered twelve participants adequate to suggest saturation of information (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), others questioned whether a number of participants this small could truly represent a targeted population for research study (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). With a small number of participants, the ability to generalize the results beyond the experiences of these children and their families was limited. Another limitation was the convenience sample taken from one school district, especially the district in which the researcher resided and was employed. A third limitation was the researcher’s demographic status of white, middle-aged, and middle class female interviewing African American families in a native-born African American community. Differences in demographic background had the potential to influence the responses of participants. Finally, the voluntary nature of recruiting the participants might have introduced bias. For example, volunteering families might have included more college-educated members than families of students who did not volunteer.

Summary of Chapter 1

Chapter 1 provided the rationale for the study, statement of the educational problem, a philosophical perspective, the research questions, a definition of terms, and an overview of the study design, research methods, and data collection procedures. Chapter 2 offers a review of literature from three areas of focus: (a) the historical parallel of the Civil Rights Movement and gifted education from the 1860s, (b) the impact of varying definitions of gifted and advanced academics education in the United States on native African American learners, and (c) African American family educational decision-making considerations. Chapter 2 presents the methodology for the study. Chapter 4 shares the findings of the study, guided by the research
questions. This chapter is divided into three sections; (1) Groups 1, 2, and 3 student participants, (2) Group 4 parent participants, and (3) how the parents and the children agree or disagree with each other. Chapter 5 offers a call for justice for African American students, conclusions, recommendations for practice, implications for further research, hindsight, and study limitations.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The survey of literature focused on three components related to justice for native-born African American families regarding gifted and advanced academics participation. First, historical efforts for equity and excellence for African American gifted and advanced academics learners are addressed. Second, the lack of universal definition of gifted and advanced academics learners and its potential contribution to a lack of justice in serving this group of learners was presented. Third, limited research literature that existed regarding how native-born African American families made educational decisions together, especially decisions concerning college was examined.

The Quest for Equity and Excellence for African American Students

This section of the review of literature begins with a presentation of the concurrent progression of civil rights and gifted and advanced academics education, goes on to explore the lack of excellence and equity for African American students, and concludes with data showing native-born African American students have been unjustly excluded from advanced educational programs.

The Concurrent Progression of Civil Rights, Gifted, and Advanced Academics

The histories of gifted education and civil rights had a concurrent and somewhat reactionary relationship and provided insight when studying gifted and advanced academics African American students. When education for all students dominated the political arena, gifted education was deemphasized. When society demanded excellence, gifted education reemerged as a focus. Speilhagen and Brown (2008) chronicled the pendulum of the quest for equity and excellence, whose arcs depended on the current political climate, claiming that “true equity
cannot disallow opportunities to pursue excellence at appropriate ability levels, areas, and interests for the individual learner” (p. 385). Sacrificing either at the expense of the other was not acceptable. This observation has certainly been true for gifted and advanced academics for African American students.

An analysis of the events in history that chronicled the Civil Rights Movement, especially of African Americans, and gifted education, five significant milestones emerged.

Table 2

*Milestones in the Concurrent History of the Civil Rights Movement and Gifted Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Civil Rights Events</th>
<th>Gifted Education Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860s</td>
<td>Civil Rights Act of 1866 defined citizenship and protected African Americans</td>
<td>St. Louis superintendent William Torrey Harris educated gifted students in public school—1868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910s</td>
<td>NAACP formed by DuBois as a challenge to Plessey versus Ferguson—1910</td>
<td>Lewis Terman, “father” of gifted education, published the Stanford-Binet in 1916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Thurgood Marshall presented Brown Versus Board of Education—separate but equal overturned in 1954</td>
<td>The National Association of Gifted Children was established by Ann Isaacs in 1954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>ESEA reauthorization created a Standards-based system, including same standards for all—1994</td>
<td><em>National Excellence: The Case for Developing America's Talent</em> issued—1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) ESEA reauthorization--accountability and equity for all students—2002</td>
<td><em>A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students</em>—2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Five decades after the Civil Rights Act of 1866, W. E. B. DuBois formed the NAACP as a challenge to Plessey versus Ferguson, and Lewis Terman studied 1500 gifted children beginning in 1921, and culminating with publication of *Genetic Studies of Genius*, in which he noted that gifted students were
(a) qualitatively different in school, (b) slightly better physically and emotionally in comparison to normal students, (c) superior in academic subjects in comparison to the average students, (d) emotionally stable, (e) most successful when education and family values were held in high regard by the family, and (f) infinitely variable in combination with the number of traits exhibited by those in the study. This is the first volume in a five-volume study spanning nearly 40 years. (NAGC, 2013)

For the next thirty years, both the Civil Rights Movement and the gifted movement continued to advance in increments because of the efforts of individuals who championed these causes, leading up to two watershed events: Brown versus the Board of Education and establishment of the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC). Brown was a culmination of Thurgood Marshall’s leadership of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund to challenge the separate but equal status of education; the U.S. Supreme Court abolished segregation in schools on May 14, 1954 (“History of Brown,” 2014), and public school districts reacted to the ruling for 60 years in various ways including mandatory busing. Even while schools became more racially integrated, gifted and advanced academics classes did not (Ford, 2011). In the same year, a significant number of educators and psychologists convened to create a national support organization for gifted learners and established the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) (NAGC, 2013). These actions promoted the causes of sponsoring organizations on a national stage, prompting more cohesive, but completely separate approaches to an equitable and excellent education. A renewed bolstering of both focuses occurred with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which marked the beginning of a formalized, legal relationship between civil rights and education, and especially gifted education. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned using race, nationality, or gender to discriminate and segregate, and equal opportunities in education became
a part of the anti-discrimination effort. From 1965 to the present, a series of laws and rulings had gradually directed how the nation and the nation’s schools were to eliminate segregation and discrimination (Find Law, 2013; Zinn, 2003).

The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the fourth significant historical marker, represented substantial federal government influence on PK-12 curriculum. By this time, Title 1, a part of President Johnson’s 1964 War on Poverty, and the public’s reaction to it, had emerged as a significant, sustained influence on public education. With this reauthorization, the U. S. Department of Education expected educational institutions to set high standards for all children and for children to meet them (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; John F. Kennedy, 2013; PBS, “Black Culture Connection”, 2013). Students served by the following programs were “expected to achieve to the same standards that are expected of all children” (U.S. Department of Education, 1995): Helping Disadvantaged Students Meet High Standards (Title 1, Part A), the Education of Migratory Children program (Title 1, Part C), the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII), and the Indian Education program (Title IX). The 1994 Improving America’s Schools reauthorization of ESEA increased the expected performance for all children through collaboration between state and federal entities as well as between schools and communities. It set the foundation for stakeholders to expect and deliver the best for all children. At the same time, the U. S. Department of Education underscored the lack of services for gifted youth and recommended research in gifted education when it issued National Excellence: The Case for Developing America’s Talent (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; NAGC, 2013). The document presented data about gifted learners and their subpar performance when compared to international students. Examples of ineffective practices included not individualizing instruction for students who were attending the first day of the school year with 35% to 50% of the intended
curriculum already mastered at a time when only 7% of 17-year-olds could solve multi-step math problems. The mismatch between student needs and the educational opportunities available created a call for changes. The U.S. students were not performing at the level of excellence needed to compete internationally. Both the ESEA reauthorization of 1994 and the *National Excellence: The Case for Developing America’s Talent* supported the need for additional attention to the African American gifted child.

The final significant historical parallels concerned African American civil rights and gifted civil rights were the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) ESEA reauthorization of 2002, a bill establishing public school accountability for the education of all children, and the publication of *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students* (2004). This watershed gifted research presented the lack of appropriate acceleration strategies for advanced learners. These two actions specifically called for an individualized approach to educating students. NCLB required all students to meet minimum performance standards each year. No longer could struggling students be hidden within a larger, more prepared, group of students. Changes in Title 1 linked funding of support programs for students to student performance by school. *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students* published by the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa, called for each gifted child to receive the opportunity to grow an entire year for each year he or she was in school. The report provided data and strategies to ensure gifted learners had their needs met.

Failure to incorporate both equity and excellence into efforts to improve the quality of education plagued the U. S system. With the birth of the standards based curriculum in 1994, the standards became the same for all learners, and the focused centered on the minimum standards being met. Thomas and Brady (2005) noted that NCLB cemented the “sameness” approach to
education. Contrarily, Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004) promoted acceleration and needs of the individual student as means to rectify educational ills of gifted students in *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students* (2004). Despite the efforts of several laws, programs, and individuals, American schools had still left behind many students—and some of our brightest.

**Lack of Excellence and Equity as a Concurrent Focus**

Hanna (2011) traced the evolution of ESEA into NCLB, focusing on how educators had implemented the law, its unintended effects, and how each of the reauthorizations of the original legislation added to or changed a particular aspect in an attempt to address concerns. Some changes resulted in unfunded mandates and in loss of the capacity of the systems at that time to support innovations successfully. Success depended on the existing capacity of systems or on educators’ ability to improve capacity (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). The effectiveness of the innovation tended to rely on the connectedness of the design with its implementation. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and NCLB, legislators intended to create systems in which all students would learn, but how have we implemented these systems?

In short, the gulf between the intent and the reality of implementation of equity had continued. A stark example was *The Blueprint for Reform* (2010), authored by the U.S. Department of Education, which was intended to guide the Obama administration’s reauthorization of the ESEA. In the beginning portion of the document, President Barak Obama called for educational reform to follow tenets of a moral imperative, “the key to securing a more equal, fair, and just society” (p. 1). The first African American President of the United States cited the needs of American children for a “world-class education” that would be accomplished by “families, communities, and schools working in partnership to deliver services and supports
that address the full range of student needs” (p. 1). The significance of this blueprint was its declaration that education was not the purview of schools alone and that all stakeholders in the educational process might need to use a different lens. The American Recovery Act of 2009, which further supported and developed the blueprint for reform, focused on the following components of an effective, equitable educational plan:

(1) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness to ensure that every classroom has a great teacher and every school has a great leader;

(2) Providing information to families to help them evaluate and improve their children's schools, and to educators to help them improve their students' learning;

(3) Implementing college- and career-ready standards and developing improved assessments aligned with those standards; and

(4) Improving student learning and achievement in America's lowest-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions. (p. 3)

Areas of focus of the American Recovery Act included community and family involvement, information on how to become actively involved in improving education, and the path to career and college readiness. Gifted and advanced academics were not addressed in NCLB, and some wanted to change that reality. In Barak Obama’s suggestions to Congress in 2010, the White House called for using grants at the state and district levels, combined with community partnerships, to improve the rigor of educational experiences that would include college-level work and “access to gifted and talented education programs” (U. S. Department of Education, The Blueprint for Reform, 2010, p. 29). In particular the recommended college-level approaches included early-college, dual-enrollment, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate programs; other accelerated programs; gifted and talented programs; alternative credit accrual; and additional support mechanisms such as counseling, mentoring, and study
skills to facilitate success (U. S. Department of Education, *A Blueprint for Reform*, 2010). Despite the inclusion of provisions that would support African American gifted and advanced academic learners, this reform effort was never voted in. Despite the intent of some researchers and politicians to mandate excellence and equity in education, the Blueprint document had little support.

In spite of the notable historical progression of ESEA, the Civil Rights Act, and gifted and advanced academics education, the conclusion was that some schools and districts still lacked participation of historically underrepresented populations in gifted and advanced academics programs (U. S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). The unjust achievement, opportunity, and excellence gaps persisted for African American students. History argued that we cannot continue to sacrifice the minds and the futures of historically unrepresented gifted and advanced academic students. The system set the standard, and the system allowed marginalized gifted and advanced academic students to perform at minimum competency, even when those students had the ability to move beyond the minimum level. Parents who did not understand the educational system strove to combat institutional practices that promoted inequity (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). Educational systems and civic movements had not resulted in a society that achieved excellence for all students. Only some were able to participate in gifted and advanced courses because of inconsistent definitions of gifted and advanced academics and family understandings of these programs.

Chronicling the major historical and political events in the twentieth century, Spielhagen and Brown (2008) classified events according to whether their impetus was the quest for equity or excellence. Events ranged from the dream of education for all, *Sputnik*, NCLB, to the publishing of *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students* in 2004.
In the U. S., the educational system often had not been successful with marginalized populations in gifted and advanced academics because of a lack of focus on both equity and excellence. Of the twenty events noted by Spielhagen and Brown (2008), only two qualified as targeting both equity and excellence: (1) the National and State Leadership Conferences in the 1970s and 1980s which resulted in policies supporting gifted education for most states, and (2) the establishment of the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University as a “national outreach to gifted children, especially among underserved populations” (p. 379). Historically U. S. education focused on equity without a state or national accountability goal of achievement beyond the bare minimum standards. If the federal and state systems were satisfied with the performance of a child, regardless of how much actual growth occurred, then systems often did not meet the needs of the gifted learner. Since the wasted potential of gifted learners was not in the public realm of focus, “gifted student…[were] being left out, shut out, or just plain ignored” (Spielhagen and Brown, 2008, p. 384) Families often did not have the tools to combat lack of service. If students were part of an underserved population, they were more noticeably excluded because the students and families did not necessarily have the knowledge to advocate for themselves. Advocates of gifted education supported equitable experiences of excellence for all students, as well as research, practice, policy, and funding that pursued excellence for all learners (Speilhagen & Brown, 2008).

African Americans Have Been Excluded

Findings showed that African Americans were not participating in gifted and advanced courses equitably and eligible children had been excluded. In 2006 the estimated participation of U.S. African American children in gifted classes and Advanced Placement was 9.15% and 7.93% respectively (Ford, 2011; U. S. Department of Education, 2006). In 2002, African
American students comprised a similar 17.80 percent of the population and 10.41 percent of
American students in gifted education dropped from 2002 to 2006 (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting,
2008). National and local efforts to close the opportunity gap did not impact the trend of
inequitably educating native-born African American students. Justice had not permeated how
African Americans were served in U.S. schools.

In reality, the U. S. had made some recent progress in attaining both equity and
excellence in one area. The percentage of African American students enrolled in AP courses
increased (7.93% to 9%), while the percentage of African American students remained the same
(16%). Growth had occurred but the participation in AP was still not equitable (Ford, 2011; U. S.
Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

In 2014, Texas public schools that offered AP courses, as compared to U.S. schools,
showed similar African American enrollment in AP, but a substantial underrepresentation in
gifted programs. The state goal for equitable programs was for the demographics of the
educational program to match the demographics of the total student population (Texas State
Plan, 2009), yet the gap between the state demographics and gifted program demographics was
12%. This data clearly underscores the lack of representation in gifted programs in Texas. Figure
2 displays the most recent participation data available. The literature regarding civil rights and
gifted and advanced academics education underscored the lack of access to these programs for
African American students in the U. S. and Texas. Potential reasons for the lack of participation
in gifted and advanced academics programs for native-born African American students could
involve the confusion of definitions in the fields of gifted education, and subsequently, confusion
among schools and families, regarding definitions of gifted and advanced academics.
Educators and researchers had studied and discussed the question of how the American educational system had excluded African American students from participating in gifted and advanced academics since the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The educational system and its decision-makers had marginalized African American students in many ways; Ford (2011) defined marginality as “disconnection between students and the conditions designed for learning” (p. 218). The past and current educational systems perpetuated the disconnections by using rigid definitions of giftedness, using culturally biased instruments for identification, measuring success narrowly once students were in the programs, and focusing on competition and the advancement of the individual versus encouraging the strength of the African American learner within a community. The national educational system failed to use a universal definition for gifted so states adopted their own, and the fact that identification of giftedness was content and
culture dependent was often ignored (Ford, Harris, Tyson, Trotman, 2002; Howard, 2008; Davis, 2010; Ford, 2011; Morris, Selmer, Martucci, White, Goodykootz, 2011). For a definition that uncovers giftedness in African American gifted and advanced academic learners, researchers suggested using Renzulli’s Three Ring conceptualization of Giftedness, Sternberg’s Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, or Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences as door-openers of giftedness for African American learners because these definitions considered talent development (Ford, Grantham, Whiting, 2008; Ford, 2011; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011). Instead, the instruments commonly used for identification and measuring success in gifted education marginalized African American students’ participation in programs and opportunities and perpetuated injustices. The IQ tests often used for identification were culturally biased against a student who is not a part of the mainstream culture: white American middle class. African American, second-language, and economically disadvantaged students often failed to do well on IQ tests because of test bias, stereotype threat, poor test-taking skills and experiences, and a failure of the instrument to take strengths into consideration (Ford, Harris, Tyson, Trotman, 2002; Davis, 2010; Ford, 2011).

Because gifted qualities of African American learners might not show up with an IQ score (Davis, 2010; Ford, 2011), these learners might not have had the opportunity to participate successfully in gifted programs. This turmoil impacted equitable representation of African American students in gifted programs and contributed to the deficit thinking about what children could not do versus what they might be able to do if they were given the opportunity. Ford called this deficit thinking versus dynamic thinking (Ford, 2011; Ford, 2013).
In this section, literature on the failure of the field to arrive at a common definition of the field is reviewed and followed by discussion of some of the consequences of this confusion from the perspective of justice for African American learners. The section concludes with consideration of the complications arising from the recent introduction of advanced academics as the high school component of many school programs for gifted learners. Introduction of new terminology, policies, and practices further complicates the lack of accessibility of the field and its programs to African American students and their families.

Historical Efforts to Define Gifted and Advanced Academics

The definition of gifted and advanced academics education had varied among researchers, state and national governments, and education practitioners. Carman (2013) analyzed 103 empirical articles in 38 journals to determine that a common definition of giftedness for research did not exist and discussed the difficulty that condition poses for researchers. If the researchers could not agree on the qualifications of a gifted student, practitioners would likely be confused on how to identify and serve gifted learners. The failure of the field to arrive at a common definition of the field had implications of injustice for African American gifted and advanced academics learners.

The first federal definitions emerged with The Education Amendments of 1969. Gifted and talented students were defined as children with outstanding intellectual ability or creative talent that necessitated services outside the realm of normal school offerings (Peters, 2012; Stephens & Karnes, 2000). With the release of the *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (U. S. Department of Education, 1993), educators considered issues of cultural and poverty bias in assessment practices and service design. Gagne (2007), who had been researching various types and degrees of giftedness, supported gifted services that required a
focus on diverse cultural and economic status of children in specific schools or communities. While the idea of talent development was included in the history of gifted education, the call for developing talent rather than simply measuring achievement emerged more forcefully in 1993.

Definitions of gifted are myriad. Stephens and Karnes (2000) surveyed definitions of giftedness that spanned the 20th century, including those of Terman, originator of the term “gifted,” and DeHaan and Havighurst who identified several types and levels of talent. Other facets of the gifted learner that were included in definitions were Feldhusen (variety of talents), Gange (levels of talent), Clark (processing talent), Borland (need for programming to match talent), and Piirto (superior talent recognition) (Stephens & Karnes, 2000), Sternberg (analytical, creative, and practical thinking) and Gardner (multiple intelligences) also had developed and refined definitions of giftedness (Sternberg, 2009).

The discrepancies in defining gifted learners had potentially contributed to the inequity in identifying and providing services for African American gifted learners. If researchers and educators had focused on one definition to the exclusion of others, then students might have had more consistently received services.

Stephens & Karnes (2000) traced considerations related to the lack of universal definition, resulting concerns, and the history of attempts to provide one. They discussed the impact of lack of a universal consensus on gifted research and consequently gifted identification and service design. These concerns included lower external validity of research (Carman, 2013); ability to seek a common research agenda with clarity, rigor, and relevance (Dai & Chen, 2013); a need for multiple assessments (Johnsen, 2009); assessments and services being culture specific (Leavitt, 2009); and resulting theoretical fragmentation and inconsistent definitions of core
concepts (McBee, McCoach, Peters, & Matthews, 2012). If one believed giftedness were fluid and culture specific, a one-size-fits-all definition might not work for all communities.

Jarvis (2009) traced three shifts in the last twenty years in efforts to define gifted. Moving from the static, unitary definition framed by IQ tests, the first shift included a view of giftedness as multifaceted and including a variety of fields and manifestations. Influences on this shift included Gardner (multiple intelligences), Sternberg (triarchic theory of intelligence), Renzulli (three ring conception), Tannenbaum (five factors for becoming critically acclaimed performers or producers of ideas), and Gagne (Five Fields of Talent and Levels of Giftedness). Jarvis noted that the US Department of Education definition dated 1993 exemplified the first shift with its focus on the intellectual, creative, artistic, and leadership characteristics in specific academic fields. A decade later, a second shift called for a consideration of cultural context when identifying gifted individuals. The contributors to this shift included Sternberg and Baldwin (early intervention and not using IQ tests), Vialle (belief in social and affective context), Callahan (involving parents and mentors with flexible and culturally relevant curriculum), and McIntire (focus on strengths, not deficits and use non-traditional assessment measures). A third shift considered both performance and potential of gifted learners, some using the two concepts interchangeably, when identifying giftedness. This last shift embodied “the dual goals of contemporary gifted education: to respond to salient advanced performance, and to uncover and foster hidden potential” (Jarvis, 2009, p. 235). Programs for gifted students that employed this third phase recognized both currently high-performing students and those with potential. Many researchers of African American gifted learners seemed to support the third phase as more inclusive as their research also recommended these considerations (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Siegle, Zhang, & Chen, 2005; Coleman, 200; Corra, Carter, & Carter, 2011; Davis, 2010; Ford,
The lack of a universal definition of gifted students contributed to schools’ implementing a variety of identification practices and resulting services for students. African American learners have not received just inclusion in gifted programs, potentially because the definitions have varied significantly in the field.

Consequences of Confusion of Definition

In response to this continued quest to define gifted and advanced academics, the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC, 2010) presented a position paper with a proposed common definition of gifted students, centering on the potential of student and talent development. Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) followed with another definition underscoring potential, academic achievement, and reaching a status of eminence that has engendered significant discussion. The promotion of potential and expected eminence generated renewed dialogue regarding disagreement in the field of gifted education because it emphasized gifted potential and established eminence rather than intelligence as a basis for gifted inclusion.

One of the purposes for proposing a definition that incorporated potential was to increase the number of minority students served by gifted or advanced academics. Recommendations to improve inclusion of underrepresented populations in gifted programs included the following: using inclusive, early, holistic, and culturally responsive identification practices; assuring program services were culturally responsive, cognitively challenging, peer-based, and psychosocially developing; and creating school cultures that valued individual differences (Olszewski-Kublius & Clarenbach, 2012). School districts potentially needed to broaden the scope of assessment instruments both qualitatively and quantitatively when attempting to include...
a larger, diverse population in the gifted program as suggested by Ford (2010a), Ford (2011), Davis (2010), and Van Tassel Baska (2010). These efforts to uphold justice in serving gifted and advanced academics African American learners had not been embraced as the field still disagreed on who gifted and advanced students were.

Pathway to justice confusing. Introduction of new terminology, policies, and practices has further complicated the lack of accessibility for gifted and advanced academics learners. Recently, the term “advanced academics” has emerged in the field of gifted education for students who have college and academic priorities. Most scholars defined “advanced academics” by its result -- graduation from college -- without defining the pathway of the journey of a student in advanced academics. Siegel and McCoach (2007) explained advanced academics as a way to shift focus from people to programs. This umbrella term included all efforts to provide rigorous instruction and growth for students that resulted in readiness for university experiences. Hence, gifted education was included under the umbrella of advanced academics offerings. However, for parents, students, and the community, gifted and advanced academics distinctions were not apparent. Advanced academics is the general term that refers to all advanced programs as a whole. Within the advanced academics category, specialized group are included such as gifted, Pre-AP, and AP courses. Figure 2 clearly defines the distinction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advanced Academics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gifted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2  Relationship of Advanced Academics, Gifted, Pre-AP and AP

Introduction of advanced academics into the program mix had the potential to contribute to lack of justice. Some perceived not providing gifted services for gifted learners as not
providing the optimum learning environment for gifted learners to reach their potentials. If the world of advanced academics was perceived as a place where the high achiever followed the rules, worked within the system of high-level academics, and focused on accuracy, gifted learners were thought to require separated approaches to maximize their learning (Kingore, 2004; Kingore, 2006). Advocates of advanced academics saw this as an opportunity issue. Students could take advantage of the opportunity to take Pre-AP or AP courses if they knew about the courses, but they had to be available, and students had to feel welcome, to maximize their opportunity for learning. To improve their chances of success, the educator had to consider students’ socioeconomic, cultural, racial, and geographic contexts as part of their support (Dai and Chen, 2013; Olszewski-Kublius & Clarenbach, 2012; Hertburg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). A different approach was also often needed for African American gifted learners to achieve success and maximize potential (Ford, 2011, 2013).

Some recent research has considered the misunderstandings about program placement arising from student and parent equating gifted education and Advanced Placement without understanding how educators placed students in either type of class. Also considered was the impact on risk-taking of having a dignified way to exit the gifted or advanced academics program (Hallet & Venegas, 2011). Findings suggested that ultimately, parents desired to support children’s advanced academics efforts both in high school and in college even if they did not know what that support looked like (VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler, 2009). However, the confusion of definitions for gifted, Pre-AP, AP, and advanced academics potentially contributed to families not knowing how to support their children, and students exiting advanced academics programs (Hallet & Venegas, 2011; Hopkins and Garrett, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler, 2009). A lack of consensus from
professionals in the gifted and advanced academics field had potentially contributed to the injustice toward African American children and their families in the attempts to prepare for college and careers.

This overview of definitions of gifted and advanced academics underscored the concerns that researchers of native-born African American gifted learners had historically expressed (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Siegle, Zhang, & Chen, 2005; Coleman, 200; Corra, Carter, & Carter, 2011; Davis, 2010; Ford, 2010b; Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; VanTassel-Baska, 2010; Worrell, 2007): if the definition were not consistent for all educational entities, and it was culturally biased, African American gifted and advanced academic students could not have access to appropriately challenging programming. Researchers in the gifted field have once again recently attempted to define gifted individuals and appropriate gifted services with a consideration for inclusion and justice, but the continued lack of consensus contributed to the continued lack of inclusions, hence lack of justice for African American learners.

When educational environments failed to provide support for all aspects of the needs of the gifted learner, schools denied justice to students. Educators needed to create an environment so students could learn; however a lack of consensus in defining gifted education stymied efforts to do so. Even when the system used a preponderance of evidence to uncover gifted and advanced academic potential, educators often did not pay attention to the social and emotional aspect of entering the gifted and advanced academics classroom which marginalized minority or culturally diverse students (Baldwin, 2004; Cross, 2002; Davis, 2010; Delilse & Galbraith, 2002; Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008; Neihart, 2007; Sdlacek, 1993). Without the attention to the social and emotional component of the classroom context, students often performed below expectations or left gifted classrooms. Many educators had the attitude that
students belonged in the rigorous environment only if they could step into the room and begin performing at the new level immediately. At times, the adults in the school environment unjustly expected the students to bridge any gaps on their own.

Asking students to endure a culture different from their own without proper transitional, supportive experiences created an atmosphere of injustice. Educators might not have known what African American students were experiencing when they chose academically challenging courses, and because each teacher or school might support gifted students differently, confusion among educators likely contributed to student discomfort or lack of success. Few teachers knew how it felt to enter a classroom as a minority or experience the taunts of their peers who accused them of acting white. African-Americans who perceived that what they did reflected on others of their race and culture might have put pressure on children who ventured in new directions. Because there were so few African American teachers involved with gifted or advanced academics programs, the child was unlikely to meet a teacher who could empathize (Ford, 2011; Harper, 2004; Henfield, 2012; Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, Peternel, 2010).

Because standard definitions of gifted and advanced academics were not available, mainstream educators and other students often unjustly misinterpreted strengths of African American students as negative traits (Ford, 2011). For example, cultural deficit theories still perpetuated the belief that different was inferior. African American communities were seen as different from the middle-class white communities, so the difference sometimes translated to inferiority (Davis, 2010; Ford, 2011). African American children often encountered this attitude when they entered the gifted or advanced academic classroom. Some of those differences that African American children exhibited included a behavior style that encouraged physical activity, body language, intonations and facial expressions accompanying speech, and a learning style that
capitalized on field dependent, global, and relational experiences (Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Henfield, 2012). If the mainstream educator did not understand these cultural strengths of the student, and instead saw the characteristics in a negative light, the child might be misinterpreted and dismissed physically, intellectually, or emotionally. Educators could provide justice for African American gifted and advanced academics students if they adopted the idea that differences in students could be strength, not inferiority.

Ultimately, recognizing the ability of academic success in African American students and not providing tools for their success was a justice issue. One recurring challenge for gifted and advanced academic learners was a lack of recognition of non-cognitive factors in high achievement (Olszewki-Kublius and Clarenbach, 2012) and of an understanding by educators of their role in student success. Students lacking these non-cognitive skills needed programs and services that provided the challenging curriculum and extended contact with peers that the gifted research had historically demanded. However, African American students also required culturally responsive curriculum and an emphasis on developing cognitive and psychosocial skills such as meta-cognitive strategies for sustained success in gifted and advanced academics programs (Gritter, Beers, and Knaus, 2013; Honken and Ralston, 2013; Olszewki-Kublius and Clarenbach, 2012). Without support to develop non-cognitive abilities, giftedness of students often remained hidden, and students subsequently gave up on advanced programs (Conley, 2005, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, Chandler, 2009). When children could not access resources that could positively impact their futures, and adults who might have influenced student access did not, justice had not prevailed.

Stephen Raudenbush (2009) presented the idea that “all children deserve an equal chance to learn, to work, to contribute, and to prosper” (p. 169). The failure of the gifted field to agreed
upon a definition of gifted and advanced academics, has contributed to some students having been unjustly underserved. Unless school systems maintained a practice of sustained support for students with opportunity or excellence gaps, African American students often were uncomfortable with or not prepared for advanced academics. Potential was not enough without a development of the behaviors needed to support students (Conley, 2005; Conley, 2010; Renzulli 2012). An open school environment and a culturally relevant curriculum provided the means for improving learning, and the one-size-fits-all approach had not served either the gifted and advanced academic African American students in our schools.

Family Decision-making in Middle and High School

Role of Families in Education and College Readiness

The literature regarding African American family involvement in choosing and sustaining participation in gifted and advanced academics is sparse. The literature that does exist rests on a set of assumptions about the context of decision-making about college that is explored here. The section then looks at the related topics of what is known from the research about the influence of culture on African American family interactions with schools, barriers for African American families in making decisions about advanced academics, and what is known by African American families about academic decision-making. Each of these topics has the potential to introduce findings that may suggest justice is not being served to the extent that the cultures of families are not respected by schools, that schools or other social constructs perpetuate barriers to families, or that African-American families lack equitable access to relevant information.

Current thinking about college knowledge and decision-making has informed the research in the field. Often the grounds for family decision-making for middle and high school students regarding preparation for college has been perceived as largely depending on the
experience of the parents. Those experiences related to income level, college attendance, college completion, work experience related to higher education, and other college knowledge factors (Conley, 2005, 2010; Davis, 2010; Ford, 2011; Smith, 2008). Consideration of the roles of families, schools, and universities in student decision-making suggested that while both home and school entities usually desired partnerships, their success was threatened for many families by both the context of the school outreach and the families’ previous interactions with schools as both students and caregivers. Although different families had different communication needs, educational institutions established school-parent-child communication patterns that worked for some families but not for others, further complicating the school and home relationship (Davis, 2010; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008).

Recent education legislation in the reauthorization of ESEA/NCLB had recognized the importance of parental involvement. Parent communication and involvement was now included in the language of 2001 NCLB reauthorization, with particular emphasis on the right of the parent to know the results and interpretations of mandated tests taken by their children. However, many parents and family members have limited understanding of large scale assessments and their interpretation. As such, information provided in assessment reports and school report cards (which are required by NCLB) may be difficult for parents and families to use in making decisions about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the program provided for their children. (Roach & Elliot, 2009, p. 72)

The lack of understanding regarding test results in general, and gifted testing in particular, might contribute to the inclusion of African American children in gifted programs. Decisions to join programs or fight for inclusion might be hampered by a lack of understanding of the place of testing in gifted education.
Influence of Culture on Decision-making

The research on family involvement in schools affirmed that parents looked for respect for their home culture from the school (Ford, 2011; Pinder, 2013). In studies where the school context offered a pluralistic approach that enabled families to keep their own cultures while learning the culture of the school, then families partnered comfortably with the schools (Porter, 2008). Families did not want to lessen their commitments to cultural heritages in order to exist in a school culture. If relinquishing personal cultural characteristics were demanded from children by schools, families kept their distance from the school. In contrast, schools with culturally sensitive curriculum and approaches to interactions between school and home helped their students to maneuver the middle-class norms of school and to curtail avoidance of demanding courses that led ultimately to college (Corra, Carter, & Carter, 2011; Ford, 2011; Pinder, 2013; Worrell, 2007).

Considered a part of culture, ethnicity has had a significant impact on family decisions regarding courses taken in middle and high school. According to Kunjufu (2002) “Negative peer pressure discourage[d] almost all African American youth from participating in advanced placement, honors, and gifted and talented classes unless getting on the honor roll [was] easy and [didn’t] require additional study time” (p. 4). Because African American families were often collectivist, asking their children to leave their peer groups to take advanced courses was more than most families were willing to endure (Ford, 2011). This request to leave their peer group would seem unjust to minority students who had no peers in gifted and advanced academics; students from other ethnic groups were able to remain with their peer groups while participating in these courses.
Researchers should not make the mistake of believing African American families are homogeneous. Hayes (2011) noted that geographic and socioeconomic differences affected how African American families interacted with schools. For example, with a higher level of education of the parents, the larger the extent of the parent involvement. Parent expectation for achievement resulted in higher achievement for African American children (Cavalhaes, 2010). African American families expected children to attain a higher level of education than family members so the education level of the families was not a predictor of school achievement (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2009; Jeynes, 2007). Ultimately, how parents supported schools often depended on the school’s approach to the family. If the families exhibited a strong sense of self-efficacy and had positive relationships and past experiences with schools, they were more likely to directly support the child at school by attending parent/teacher meetings and school performances or athletic contests, volunteering at the school or in the classrooms, collaborating with teachers, or serving on school committees (Greene, 2013; Porter, 2008). Bandura (2000) defined self-efficacy as the belief that individuals “can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions” (p. 75). The belief in impact by an individual or a group of individuals positively influenced family involvement in schools (Jeynes, 2007). Consequently, this involvement impacted student motivation to learn since when students had a positive attitude about school, they paid better attention, exhibited positive work habits, and reduced the achievement gap between white and some minority groups (Carvalhaes, 2010; Jeynes, 2007; Rowen-Kenyon, Bell, Perna, 2008). When parents were asked to respond to and implement policies that were initiated only by the school, called a reactive model, collaboration was not facilitated (Cooper, 2009; Greene, 2013). Hayes (2011) noted that urban African American
parents who had significantly higher expectations for the educational outcomes of their children positively impacted their children’s performance and were more involved with schools.

Research supported that educators should not minimize the importance of parent involvement. Attendance, reading habits and attitudes toward school and teachers improved with parent involvement; behavior problems decreased as parents become more active in schools (Abel, 2012; Carvalhaes, 2010; Davis, 2010). To encourage parent involvement, Greene (2013), Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull (2008), and Rowen-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna (2008) suggested reaching out to families through untraditional means. They encouraged more informal communication, such as making Open House more family friendly with family photo opportunities and encouraging group meetings and conferences instead of one-on-one gatherings. These alterations of the traditional school and home communication efforts invited families’ collective cultures into school settings that were often oriented to individual competition.

Several researchers studied African American family decision-making regarding the parenting of African American adolescents. Cunningham, Mars, and Berns (2012) found that increased interaction with “significant adults” was associated with increased resilience in high academically achieving urban African American adolescents. In practice, female children received closer monitoring than males with academic endeavors, but males needed more support in academics for success (Cunningham, Mars, and Berns, 2012; Gaylord-Harden, Elmore, Montes de Oca, 2013). Consequently, the structures that African American males needed for school success were offered less frequently than needed. Bullock (2007) studied African American grandfathers who were raising grandchildren, and found that African American families cared for children despite a lack of resources and often as fictive kin. Ebaugh and Curry (2000) defined fictive kin as those who have a familial relationship “based not on blood or
marriage but rather on religious rituals or close friendship ties, that replicates many of the rights and obligations usually associated with family” (p. 189). Adults who helped African American children gain access to college were often fictive kin. Decision-making rested with the family ties and cultural expectations. Children were expected to better their lives with education as part of the cultural expectations of their families.

Barriers to Decision-making for Gifted and Advanced Academics

According to Ford (2011), one of the limitations of using only the immediate family or cultural community to make decisions for children in middle school and high school has been that low socioeconomic groups and some ethnic groups were limited in the decision-making information available. These families knew what they had personally experienced or what extended communities knew. If school communities were not approachable, then they were not able to improve the body of knowledge of families that did not feel comfortable in schools. If family norms differed from the norms of the dominant culture, and the families had experienced discrimination or discomfort in the past, the school system had much to overcome. Additionally Ford found that some parents had psycho-social concerns and did not want their children to work too hard or be separated from their peers or friends. Parents also had the fear of children’s losing their families’ cultures or becoming smarter than their parents if children took advanced courses (Davis, 2010; Ford, 2011). Parents’ lack of information fueled these misgivings and perpetuated the opportunity gap and lack of justice for their children. These students were at a disadvantage when finishing middle school and high school and making life choices.

Some of the barriers experienced by parents when making decisions concerning their children included lack of knowledge of the system. African American families noted as barriers “time poverty, lack of access, lack of financial resources, and lack of awareness” (Williams &
Sanchez, 2013, p. 62). Some African American families perceived a lack of trust and that they were not welcomed in schools as barriers to their collaborating with schools in decision-making. Thinking schools did not value their input, families were often more involved with their children’s education at home than at school (Griffin, 2012). Teaching advocacy to families was shown to provide a collective voice for African Americans (Griffin, 2012; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). To help families connect to them, schools that focused on just access and equity worked to overcome barriers by through steps such as holding meetings in the community itself, offering activities for children while parents met with school personnel, and varying the times when the collaborations occurred. Offering meetings and learning opportunities at staggered times like weekends, in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, gave families options.

Another practice found to inhibit families from successfully gathering information that impacted decisions was the school’s waiting to contact families until after all known interventions had been exhausted (Davis, 2010; Ford, Harris, Tyson, Trotman, 2002; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). Schools lost opportunities to learn key information from families if they interacted with parents too late in the process. Porter (2008) found that families preferred a family-driven approach as it invited them to be equal partners. Whether a family distrusted the school or not depended on the family’s belief in the importance of its role in the child’s education compared to the role of the teacher (Porter, 2008). Hayes (2010) noted that increased knowledge of African American parents about educational decisions available to families was associated with the frequency of the family’s interaction with schools and their level of support for school initiated interventions. Unless the school had established a relationship with families, the families were less able to see school personnel as partners.
What African American Families Know about Academic Decision-making

Researchers had found several ways that African American families have supported their children in educational pursuits. This support included expecting children to take responsibility for learning, completing homework, reading, sharing stories about their struggles and resiliency, maintaining high expectations, being aware of what was happening at school, making them feel safe, and promoting self-esteem, independence and a sense of belonging (Abel, 2012; Brandon, 2007; Greene, 2013). As African American families advocated for their children, members were a presence at school, communicated regularly, and gathered information. While Greene’s (2013) study included African American families of elementary children, other studies found similar results with high school students (Noble & Morton, 2013; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). The presence of the families in these studies affirmed the impact on just service for African American gifted and advanced academic learners.

When African American families encountered policies and procedures that they could not control, they “were unsure about how to take on significant roles that connected home and school” (Greene, 2013, p. 22). How to counter the deficit thinking that teachers project when African American parents do not interact with schools the way educators think the parents should interact was a source of parental concern (Cooper, 2009; Greene, 2013). Educators often thought that African American parents were disengaged with schools, which led to teachers becoming disengaged from the child, described as follows by Cooper (2009):

Acceptance of decontextualized and universalized assumptions of care is problematic. It leads theorists, researchers, and educators to judge cooperative, deferential, and/or passive mothers who are active in school-based activities as caring and good. Mothers
who challenge the status quo as part of their attempts to protect and advocate for educational equity are then dismissed as uncaring and bad. (p. 390)

Greene (2013) pointed out that reciprocity required educators to “balance their own goals and expectations with parents’ beliefs, values, and priorities” (p. 26) and necessitated respectful dialogue, partnerships, and collaboration. If educators solicited information about problems, surveyed families about perceptions, asked parents to fill leadership roles at the school, and made interaction a priority (Abel, 2012; Brandon, 2007; Williams & Sanchez, 2013), families felt more welcome in schools. The cost of not being proactive with families was their absence. This condition did not help students.

Research showed that the students who had interactions with family, neighbors, extended family, or school personnel obtained a distinct advantage in the decision-making process during middle school and high school. Family experiences in school and life were additional cultural dimensions that impacted familial decisions. “Parents from all cultural groups hold high educational aspirations for their children” (Porter, 2008, p. 35), but they often lacked the language and experience to help their children attain those aspirations (Greene, 2013; Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Reasons and gaps were myriad. Bryan, Braddock, & Dawkins (2006) reported that making families feel a part of the school in non-academic avenues helped establish a relationship with families that supported student achievement. For example, bringing African American families back into the schools through extracurricular activities, varsity sports, and parental involvement improved the participation and subsequent student achievement, especially among female students. Participation in varsity sports positively related to discussions in the home about education (Bryan, Braddock, & Dawkins, 2006). What schools believed about
family backgrounds often influenced how schools approached supporting students (Hilgendorf, 2012).

Partnerships between families and schools created a positive experience for caregivers, the child, and teacher (Greene, 2013; Leiding, 2008). Parents considered themselves customers because “children will not learn from adults who do not care for them” (Leiding, 2008, p. 166) and parents moved to another school if their needs are not met (Brill, 2011). As parents became more savvy consumers, schools needed to evaluate how they interacted with those families. Schools contributed to the “powerful collective voice” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 93) of parents by creating a forum for collaboration of families with each other and of families with schools. This partnership contributed to an improved equity for African American learners. For justice to prevail in our schools for gifted and advanced African American learners, the literature suggested that this partnership be nurtured.

Summary of Chapter 2

The literature reviewed in this section discussed the lack of justice for native-born African American gifted and advanced academics learners due to cultures not being respected, perpetuation of barriers from schools or other social constructs, and lack of equitable access to relevant information regarding these advanced opportunities. The literature offered data from students and families as separate groups of participants or separate studies, underscoring the limited availability of literature that presented data about decision-making of students and their families as a unit. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study including the design, setting, participants, data sources, and procedures for data collection and analysis.
The lack of advanced educational opportunities for African American youth, especially low income, urban youth, has been the subject of research by Ford, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Kaplan, 2011b; and Olszewski-Kubilius & Thompson, 2010). From their perspectives, an educational system that educates a child without consideration for previous experiences, history, or exposure to culture has missed an opportunity to capitalize on the natural resources available in the learning interaction. In addition to these, researchers such as Jarvis (2009), Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Clarenbach, J. (2012), and VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler (2009) have either stated overtly or implied the need in gifted programs for attention to the impact of culture on support for historically underrepresented populations. The present study was designed to gather the perceptions of African American students and their families regarding participation in gifted and advanced academics in AC ISD, an urban, Texas school district. Students from three groups were considered in the study: students identified as gifted who were enrolled in advanced academics classes (Group 1), students not identified as gifted who were enrolled in advanced academics classes (Group 2), and students who were neither identified as gifted nor enrolled in advanced academics classes (Group 3). The perceptions of parents were also considered.

This study used a multiple case study design, as more than one case was investigated. This depth enhanced theory building as “the comparison [of cases] may itself suggest concepts that are relevant to an emerging theory” (Bryman, 2008, p. 60). Comparisons were possible using data from within each of three student groups, across the student groups, across families, and between the student and the family groups. Using a multiple case study approach with one parent
and three student groups, similar and contrasting factors were analyzed to indicate which
elements contributed to student choices regarding gifted and advanced academic coursework.
Finally, responses of family members were compared to those of students.

The study addressed the following research questions as they pertained to the cases of
these participants from AC ISD’s gifted and advanced academics program:

1. What were the perspectives of native-born African American participants and non-
participants in high school AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs in
an urban district?
2. What were the perspectives of native-born African American family members of
participants and non-participants in high school AP programs about gifted and advanced
academics programs in an urban district?
3. How did the perspectives of the students and the family members align?

This chapter on methodology describes the philosophical lens supporting the research, the
case study design, the setting, the participants, recruiting participants, data sources, data
collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. A philosophical lens of justice and
grounded theory provided a foundation for the approach to study design, and data collection and
analysis.

Case Study Design

The design of the study was a multiple case study. Each individual student group was a
case study, and each of the student groups and the parent group were also considered as cases:
GT identified taking AP, not GT identified and taking AP, and neither GT identified or taking
AP, and all seven parents. The assumption behind this method of multiple case studies was that
since grounded theory begins with no theory or assumptions, repetition of themes among several
or all cases might indicate an evolving theory. Glesne (2011) and Bryman (2008) described the processes for multiple case study and grounded theory design. Another researcher (Li, 2010) used multiple cases to conduct a similar study on Asian families. This study did uncover themes that emerged across all student and parent case studies and also found themes germane to one case study only.

Theoretical Methodology

The methodology of grounded theory development informed the overall approach to the study by supporting the philosophical lens of searching for justice for historically excluded, discouraged, and underserved African American students and of hearing the stories of students and families as they sought justice. Students and families had stories to tell that educators needed to hear. Through the use of multiple interviews, focus groups, and a multiple case study, the researcher intended to give African American students and families voices and educators some insight into the students whom they served. The use of grounded theory provided the protocol to listen, re-listen, consider, and reconsider the stories shared by the students and their families. The data were studied deeply, compared within groups, studied again, compared between groups, and voices were heard separately and from groups. This study might help to combat what Moll (2010) vilified as “subtractive” educational practices (p. 453) such as relying on IQ tests, tracking students into industrial type occupations, disregarding cultures of origin, and perpetuating negative attitudes about the educability of students. Grounded theory’s emergent approach equitably and respectfully allowed for expression and balancing of ideas that might lead to a more just society.

Using the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), the researcher collected data systematically and then attempted to identify patterns, make connections, or establish
understandings about this group of African American families and their educational choices.
Applications of grounded theory relied on data gathered and then analyzed “through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Setting

The setting for this study was an urban community outside a major city in Texas. The AC ISD community had evolved from a suburban to an urban community in the last 25 years. While still maintaining a small town feel, the city had faced big city concerns such as poverty, burgeoning immigrant population, and transience. The diverse school district’s population was 82% economically disadvantaged. The district’s three comprehensive high schools enrolled about 2400 students each. In AC ISD (ACISD), however, a mismatch existed between the district demographics overall and the demographics of the students in gifted and advanced academics programs. The demographic make-up of the gifted program of ACISD showed overrepresentation of white and Asian students, with underrepresentation of African American students compared to those in the district as a whole.

The two sections that follow describe the district’s gifted and advanced academics programs as a means of setting the context in which the participating students had experienced gifted and advanced academics education.

Gifted and talented. Kindergarten to 12th Grade. ACISD identifies and serves gifted and talented students in grades K-12. The district approach is to screen all kindergarten students by using an achievement test, an aptitude test, and planned experiences as outlined in the Kingore Observation Inventory (KOI). After an effort for identification in kindergarten, the district uses a rolling application process in which stakeholders may nominate students for screening at any time during the school year. The campus building committee orchestrates this process, and each
aptitude, achievement and portfolio assessment component may be administered once in a calendar year for each child. This approach prevents students who miss the date because of moving to the district the day after testing from waiting a whole year to receive gifted services.

The information about programs, screening, and testing is shared with students by letter as they progress through the process. If a student is nominated, parents must sign permission forms for the student to continue with the process, and they are informed at each stage whether the student qualified and which services they received. All communication is offered in Spanish and English. If their child is not nominated, the only source of information about the GT programs for parents is the district website, occasional campus or district parent meetings, or requesting information from counselors.

GT Building Committees consider a preponderance of evidence to uncover giftedness. Students must qualify in two of three areas: achievement test scores, aptitude test scores, and/or portfolio scores. Local norms (top 10%) are used for kindergarten through third grade. National norms (90% and above) are used for older students. Students are placed in cluster groups in kindergarten to second grades. From third through eighth grade, GT students are placed in self-contained classrooms and receive GT services instruction in mathematics, science, English and some social studies. Most campuses have a GT English and GT Bilingual classroom for each grade level.

Re-evaluation is employed for all ability levels of learners during transition years from fifth to sixth grade and from eighth to ninth grade. The gifted services change in the middle school setting to self-contained, subject specific curriculum delivery with GT English Language Arts/Humanities, GT Math, and GT Science courses. High school credit opportunities occur in English I, Algebra I, Geometry, and Biology for gifted middle school students. At this level
students may be placed in only one or as many as three GT classrooms, depending on the identified areas of strength. Cognitive and social coping strategies, as well as affective well-being are “strongly linked to program type” (Eddes Hirsh, Vialle, Rogers, McCormick, 2010, p. 126). Gifted services in AC ISD include acceleration and homogeneous grouping.

Pre-AP and AP in ACISD employs the same philosophy as the College Board (2003) regarding open enrollment in Pre-AP and AP courses. Students who want to accept and are prepared for the challenge of rigorous courses like AP may participate in AP courses. No teacher recommendation, qualification, or minimum GPA is required. As part of the inclusion in an AP course, the district requires and pays for the AP exams, believing that sitting for a high stakes, college-level exam is part of the valuable AP experience.

The procedure for a student wanting to take a Pre-AP or AP class is simply signing up for the class. The process for leaving Pre-AP and AP classes is more involved, including waiting until the end of the first six weeks of the semester to give the students some time to make an adjustment and conducting a mandatory parent meeting. Counselors and teachers attempt to help students and families make an informed decision regarding the demands of the course as well as its benefits. Informing parents and student of ACISD of Advanced Academics offerings and why students might benefit from taking one or more of the 30 AP Courses offered is an ongoing effort. In general, the composition of Gifted, Pre-AP, and AP classes matches district ethnic demographics in all groups except African American. Gifted and AP programs consists of 6% African American students while the district is comprised of 12% African American students.

Pre-AP and GT classes have different characteristics in ACISD. Pre-AP courses use grade-level TEKS taught in more depth than in regular education and introduce skills needed to be successful in AP classes; no qualifier to enter these classes exists. GT courses use accelerated
grade-level TEKS with compacting, depth, and complexity and teach the skills to be successful in academically rigorous classes; students must qualify for GT services to be in these classes. The district uses the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) system on all secondary campuses to support access to and performance in rigorous coursework for students in the academic middle. Overall, the focus of the district on career and college readiness has been in the forefront for several years. However, a gap in understanding of how taking these demanding courses can help their future still exists for both parents and students.

Participants

Although demographic statistics for the district might classify other students as African American, the target group for this study was native-born African American high school students and their families living in and attending AC ISD. “Native-born,” in this study meant that participants lived in a community influenced by an African American culture and life experience and had not recently arrived in the United States. One such African American community in the city limits of AC ISD had been established in the mid 1800s. The study did not include recent immigrants from Africa or African American students who lived in neighboring cities but attended AC ISD schools. The study considered eligible students from all district high schools.

Student participants. Student participants were given pseudonyms which are used in the reporting of the findings of the study. Table 3 provides the following participant information for each one: pseudonym, group inclusion, family participation, school attended (A, B, or C), and grade level.
Table 3

Student Participants with School Grade and Indicator of Parent Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GT/AP Group 1</th>
<th>AP Group 2</th>
<th>Neither GT/AP Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Renee (School A-12th)</td>
<td>Shonda (School B-10th)</td>
<td>Destini (School C-12th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard (School A-12th)</td>
<td>Aubrey (School B-12th)</td>
<td>Charles (School B-10th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaTisha (School A-12th)</td>
<td>Michael (School A-11th)</td>
<td>Deborah (School B-10th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin (School B-10th)</td>
<td>Raymond (School C-11th)</td>
<td>Malik (School B-12th)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students with names in bold face had parents who participated.

Responses to questions about their grades suggested that the 12 students in the study were focused on school success. In Group 1, all the students maintained A or B averages and had taken more than one AP course. In Group 2, all four students maintained A or B averages, and two were taking AP for the first time. In Group 3, students had A, B, or C averages and worked hard to be successful in school. None had ever taken an AP course. More detailed information about participants is presented with results in Chapter 4.

Parent participants. Most parents who participated in the focus group or interviews had some education beyond a high school diploma. Parents of the Group 1 students included one parent who held a master’s degree in education. Two parents of Group 2 students were either currently in college or had just finished a four-year degree. Parents of Group 3 students included one military father, one mother who worked as a substitute teacher, and one parent who had some experience with the gifted program in the study district. Across all groups, only one parent currently lived with the other parent of the child interviewed. All others were either single parents or part of a blended family.
Recruiting Participants

In the summer of 2014, the researcher secured school district and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study and began the recruitment of potential participants from the African American community.

To begin the recruitment of participants, the researcher met with several community members and pastors for the African American community and shared the parameters and details of the study but no participants agreed to participate in the study as a result of these efforts. Subsequent successful efforts to recruit occurred through contacts within the school district. Flyers with the researcher’s phone and email contact information were shared with teachers to post in classrooms at all four high schools. General education math, science, English, and social studies, GT, and AP teachers were asked to share the flyers, also. After receiving information via flyer or referral by school personnel, participants contacted the researcher if interested. Recruitment materials can be found in Appendix A.

For each student who expressed an interest in the study, the researcher held a before or after school informational meetings conducted both individually or in a group. When participants continued to express an interest, the researcher held an orientation meeting for the student and the parent. As the interviews with some students progressed, the researcher continued to recruit students by requesting that ROTC and elective teachers, counselors, deans of students, and principals advertise the study. This process continued until all 12 participants were recruited and interviewed.

After agreement of participation by students and family members was established by their signing the required IRB Consent Forms, students chose to be interviewed at school or another community location, where they might have been more comfortable due to not being seen by
peers. Students and parents understood that they could choose to remove themselves from the study at any time. The involvement of a parent or adult family member of the student in the study possibly led to participants from the same family’s discussing the study’s content outside of the data collection sessions or families discussing the study within the neighborhoods or communities that they shared.

Data Sources

Five data sources included a Student and Family Questionnaire, school records data, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and memos. Each of these is discussed in a section that follows.

Questionnaires. Student and family questionnaires were completed during the orientation meetings. Students and family members provided demographic information such as name, age, gender, ethnicity, and school information such as grade, AP courses taken, GPA, GT identification and participation. Family members shared employment information and level of education as they impacted the educational background of the family. The questionnaire is in Appendix B.

School Records. As agreed through the IRB approval process, school records were not accessed by the researcher as a data source because this was a conflict of interest in her role as researcher and school district employee. Instead, the protocol allowed family members to consult school records when students or family members could not remember information asked for on the questionnaire. These records were, in fact, not used to complete the “Student and Family Questionnaires” because families and students provided all data requested during orientation.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews provided the African American students an opportunity to explain what they knew and wanted to know about gifted and advanced academic
classes in order to be admitted into and/or continue in the programs. The interviews included three separate meetings with the researcher, each with separate purposes as recommended by Seidman (2013). Each interview was designed for a 60-minute time period. The first interview established the context of the participants’ experiences by enabling them to share their past educational experiences. The second interview led the participants to reconstruct the details of their present educational experiences. The third interview encouraged the participants to reflect on the significance that their educational experiences held for them. The interview questions in Appendix C provided the protocols for the three interviews.

The interview protocol controlled the purposes of each of the three interviews: establishing the context of participants’ experiences, reconstructing the details of their experiences within the context, and reflecting on the meaning of these experiences. The interviews were semi-structured which allowed for preparation by both the interviewer and interviewee and provided opportunity for detailed follow up questions to evolve from initial questions to further explore issues generated by the interaction with participants. The researcher’s preparation for each interview included providing a written copy of all interview questions before each interview meeting and having a written copy of the questions at the interview for easy reference. The researcher followed each interview by transcribing the completed interview notes and studying them before moving to the next interview.

The intent of the interviews and the focus group with parents was for the researcher to understand the perceptions of these groups of parents and students. The cultural and social setting where the construction of understanding occurs is important (Seidman, 2013). Despite repeated efforts to work within the community rather than the educational setting, the
participating families and children were mostly comfortable with choosing the more convenient location of schools for these meetings.

Focus groups. Family focus groups and interviews included a family member of seven of the students involved. Initially family members could choose which focus group meeting they wished to attend. This series of focus groups and interviews provided a second perception of the phenomenon of interest from these family members. Semi-structured interview and family focus group questions are in Appendix C.

Memos. The researcher wrote memos to herself before, during, and after interviews. Notes were added during and after transcription. Observations and connecting thoughts were also composed during data analysis. These memos provided details and reflections of use while writing and trying to interpret the results of the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Student and family provided background information. When the study had been explained and IRB forms signed, students and family members provided students’ ethnic classification, grade, age, GPA, SES, current course schedule, and program participation in such courses as gifted and talented, Pre-AP, and AP by filling out the “Student and Family Questionnaire.” Participants also recorded the educational level and type of employment of the family member who would be a participant. The researcher provided an email address and a cell phone number for the purpose of answering questions and concerns during any part of the study. The script for this orientation meeting is in Appendix D.

Interviews. Twelve students participated in collection of data through individual semi-structured interviews. The target number of pairs of participants was 12 as this number marks the saturation point for interview qualitative data as defined by O’Reilly and Parker (2012). Parents
determined how the researcher would contact the student to set up interviews. Parents and students received interview questions prior to the interview if they desired. The students chose the times and places of the interviews. Students could not miss any classes for this activity. Most often, the students chose the library of their schools for convenience. The researcher met them in the library at the designated time and prepared the two recording devices that were used in case one of them failed. The questions were placed on the table in front of both the researcher and the participant. The researcher prepared a notebook for research notes and reminded the participant of the audio recording and the focus of the interview: past, present, or future focused. When the researcher met the student for the interview session, she answered any question that the student might have. When the participant indicated that he or she was ready, the recording devices were turned on, and the first interview question was read. The researcher practiced wait time, repetition of the question if requested, and clarifying of terms if requested. While the researcher asked questions and listened to responses, she also took notes in a notebook so follow-up questions or observations not recorded on the audio could be noted.

Probing and follow up questions based on the participants responses were employed. Each question for the session was presented in this manner. At the end of the interview, the researcher invariably asked if there were anything to add, and time and place for the subsequent interview were decided. If the interview were the third interview, the researcher provided the participant with a letter verifying the hours of community service that the participant provided by interviewing with the researcher. The participant was thanked for the investment of time, and a reminder was extended that the parent would be contacted for a follow up focus group meeting. The researcher followed this same process for all student interviews.
The researcher transcribed each interview, except one, before the next interview occurred. This one set of participant interviews occurred when the researcher was analyzing data collected previously so another professional transcribed that series of interviews. The series of interviews for each participant concluded before the commencement of the next series of interviews with a new participant.

The interviews for the three student groups were mostly collected sequentially. All four students in Group 1 participated in interviews one-after-the-other. The group data collection was complete before the researcher moved on to the Group 2 data collection. The first three members of Group 2 interviewed with the researcher sequentially. The fourth member of this group was not interviewed until the last slot of the 12 participants because the researcher did not secure his participation until late in the study. Group 3 participant interviews occurred sequentially.

Family focus group and interviews. One parent or adult family member for each student was invited to participate in follow-up family focus groups. One family focus group and four individual interviews occurred. Six mothers and one father of the African American high school students participated. These included two parents of students from Group 1, two parents of students from Group 2, and three parents of students from Group 3. Although a parent of each participating student agreed to participate in the study, this could not occur in the time available for the study given the difficulty of scheduling mutually available times.

For the parent focus group and interviews, a similar process occurred. The researcher used email and phone to contact parents. She also used an electronic scheduling application, Doodle, to orchestrate times for focus group scheduling. Only two parents attempted to use this option, but they looked at the proposed times and emailed their answers. After parents had agreed on a date for a focus group, a second researcher agreed to attend and take notes. The
parent focus group conversation was recorded with two devices, and both researchers took notes. All parent recordings except one were transcribed by the researcher. Due to time constraints, a professional transcribed one of the parent interviews.

The focus group that was held occurred in January after seven of the student interview series had been completed. The parent interviews were scheduled intermittently in February and March as it became clear that finding times for the eligible family members to meet was quite difficult. The researcher conducted the focus group and interviews in schools and at a restaurant. The focus group and interviews lasted for 60-90 minutes. If more than one family member wanted to attend the family focus group or interview session, the researcher agreed, but only one family member of each student was viewed as the active participant in the process. One family followed the protocol of having two family members present.

Data gathering form focus groups followed three steps. After greeting the parents and introducing them to one another, the parents were given copies of the focus group questions. The parents were introduced to the graduate school researcher who took notes during the focus group to assist with speaker identification. In addition to the double audio recordings, the researcher also took written notes. The process was that the researcher asked a question and the parents took turns answering. They chose when to speak, so the order of responses was not always the same. After all questions were asked and answered, the parents were thanked for their time and given a 25 dollar gift card. The researcher also invited them to contact her in the future if they had any additional questions. No one has contacted her.

Memos. The researcher used memos of research plans and questions, dated interview questions, participant interview notes (transcripts and interviewer thoughts, observations, and reflections), a journal of reflexive thoughts with entries before, during, and after interview and
focus group sessions, and analysis notes (including codes, coded data, themes, patterns, working diagrams, charts). The notebook contained documentation of thoughts throughout the research process. The researcher took notes in the notebook as she reflected on the interviews.

In summary, the researcher conducted three interviews with each of 12 students in three groups and conducted a focus group or interview session with one parent of each of the participants. Each interview ranged from 30 to 60 minutes for each student, for a total interview time of 90 to 180 minutes and 30 to 60 minutes per family member. The researcher collected student and family information by questionnaire and maintained a research memo notebook.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis using grounded theory with a philosophical lens of justice was to study the data within each case in search of themes related to justice. The process provided for analyzing the four types of data gathered, comparing findings within and across cases, identifying prevailing patterns, and establishing the data as trustworthy. This pattern of data analysis was valuable for supporting the grounded theory approach, “a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273), because the researcher could establish whether themes and sub-themes were narrowly or widely-spread. Ich (2008) and Maton & Salem (1995), Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge (2006) and Wallace (2013) were other researchers who applied this process to development of grounded theory.

In data analysis the researcher used the structure of unitizing, (finding the “smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 345), coding or the process of sorting and defining data, looking for themes (Glesne, 2011), and constant comparison of material (i.e. comparing newly collected data to previously collected data from
the study) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher used these processes with transcripts of interviews and focus groups collected from the students and families in hopes of establishing findings and implications for possible future policy, procedure, and research in the area of gifted and advanced academics with attention to the selected African American learners from one school district.

The researcher analyzed the 12 different case studies of students independently to identify themes emerging with each student. Next, she studied the data within groups to identify common themes. Then the researcher compared all 12 together as one collective case study of native-born African American high school students in one urban district. Themes emerging from data for all 12 students were identified. At this point the researcher used data from student interviews along with data from the questionnaire, parent interviews, and research notes to answer Research Question 1. The researcher analyzed the focus group and parent interviews as one group to uncover themes associated with the parent group only. After this set of data analysis, the researcher used data from a parent focus group, interviews, and research notes to answer Research Question 2. Last, the researcher compared the themes from parent data collection as a whole to students as a whole group. The follow up family focus group and interviews were informed by the student interviews. The researcher completed this comparison so Research Question 3 could be answered.

Analysis tool. NVivo, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, was a tool used to analyze the data. Both interview and focus group data were transcribed and uploaded to NVivo 10 for coding and analysis. The NVivo program facilitated the creation of codes and identifying related data. Data were analyzed and interpreted these grouped data. Fragmenting of the texts accrued and de-contextualizing data occur when using computer-assisted qualitative
data analysis software (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2006; Bryman, 2008); however, Bryman (2008) and Leech & Onwuegbuzie (2011) promoted the efficiency, speed, transparency and connections offered by these tools. To minimize the fragmentation of data while using Nvivo 10, the researcher coded data into nodes while revisiting data after it had been coded and re-evaluated the placement of the data. When re-evaluation of themes occurred, the researcher often collapsed and regrouped the nodes. Although grouping data electronically increased efficiency, it also allowed for multiple re-evaluations and adjustments to occur, ensuring proper placement and grouping within themes. These processes are described in more detail in the paragraphs that follow.

**Questionnaire analysis.** Before each review of data for students, the researcher studied the components of the student and family questionnaire responses. The questionnaire contained the following information: name; sex; grade of participant; years in ACISD gifted and advanced program; courses taken; and family member name, occupation and schooling. These data were reviewed before each student interview and family interview or focus group and before coding. The information was compared among the interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires for triangulation.

**Records analysis.** This data source was not utilized as students and family members recalled the information requested on the questionnaires.

**Interview analysis.** Each interview was uploaded into Nvivo 10. The researcher methodically examined interview data, highlighted a unit of data, and assigned it to a node. If the node did not already exist, a new node that matched the content of the data was created. The researcher followed this process of coding the three interviews for each student and one for each family member.
After the interviews for a participant were coded, the researcher reviewed the codes, looked for codes that were related, and evaluated whether a piece of data should be recoded or double-coded. This process was completed for Group 1 data, and then the researcher completed the entire process a second time for this group to assure that the process was effective in establishing themes. The same themes emerged the second time the researcher employed this analysis process, but some of the nodes that emerged in few incidences were absorbed into the nodes occurring more frequently. The collapsing and regrouping of nodes in the Group 1 analysis established the themes that were considered when analyzing subsequent data sets. The researcher used the same process for Group 2, Group 3, and the Parent Group.

The researcher established a process for indentifying nodes, analyzing data, and re-evaluating data that led to the establishment of themes. For each node with 15 or more pieces of participant data, a theme was established. Then the researcher checked the data to assure that all four participants had contributed to the data in that theme. If they had, then that node became a theme for the group. Part of the analysis of nodes included eliminating any node created from the data of only one student. Once a theme was established and its inclusion of all participants verified, the researcher included that theme in the results. This process set the standard for data analysis in the study.

Focus group and interview analysis. The analysis from the focus groups followed the same procedures as the semi-structured interviews. Part of the data collection had included the researcher’s paying close attention to the exchange of conversation within the group as cautioned by Bryman (2008) when more than one person was communicating in an exchange. The researcher was able to focus on the group dynamics because she had set up two recording devices to capture the dialogue and invited another researcher to take notes so she could focus on
leading the focus group and recording group dynamics. The analysis of data included constant comparison of the members within the focus group and parent interviews as one data set. Once codes were established from all parent data collected, the researcher compared the family focus group themes with the whole group student themes.

Similar to the work of Li (2010) who presented three case studies about the impact of “family social and cultural dynamics on Asian children’s learning experiences outside of school” (p. 52), the researcher used in a within and cross-case analysis to create four different collective case studies, one for each group and for Groups 1, 2, and 3 together. These were based on the data from the semi-structured interviews and the Student and Family Questionnaires following these steps using Nvivo 10. The researcher compared the four students within each group to one another within the group, establishing themes for these sub-groups; gifted and taking AP, not gifted and taking AP, not gifted and not taking AP.

Memos. The researcher analyzed the memos of researcher reflections, protocols, specifics of data-gathering sessions, and questions for future sessions each time she interviewed or coded data. Reading the notes informed the interviews and established iterative questioning. The notes were read before transcription and notes were taken during transcription.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness of a qualitative research study attends to the following elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility in this study was established by triangulation of data, adopting an established and respected research protocol, following a line of questioning and methods of analysis, and using an interview protocol to establish familiarity and honesty (Shenton, 2004). In the study, triangulation of data had been established by comparing the questionnaire data with the interview
and focus group data of students and families. Each step of the data collection process mirrored the other participants’ experience as closely as possible. Credibility was increased by memos and established protocols for setting up, conducting, concluding, and transcribing the interviews and focus group. Establishing the steps taken to collect data provided a roadmap for other researchers who want to replicate the study. Transferability and dependability occurred when the details of the study were described in the data collection and data analysis sections so the study could be replicated in another setting. The overlapping methods and use of established research methods such as Seidman’s (2013) interviewing protocol contributed to the dependability of the study. This protocol included the conducting of three separate interviews and building rapport with the student. With most participants, the third interview provided information that the student had not voluntarily shared in the first meeting. The same questions were asked in the same order for each participant, and the recording, transcribing, and data analysis followed the established protocol. The design of the iterative questions provided an opportunity for students to answer some questions multiple times. Often the students would say, “Like I said before…” which indicated that they intended to provide the same answer each time the question was asked. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the study was supported by conformability which was supported by triangulation and an audit trail (Shenton, 2004). Information came from the students and families themselves as the conclusion of the study provided information not known by the researcher or the researcher’s district previously. The audit trail consisted of interview dates and recordings, transcriptions, research memos, and numerous meetings with a university researcher to focus the study and its protocol.

The procedures put in place to avoid or lessen pitfalls to qualitative research included those concerned with securing participants, collecting data, and analyzing data. Interviewing
each student participant three times resulted in at least four face-to-face exchanges with each student. The interviews were not one-time exchanges that lack rapport. By the time the researcher met with the students, the parents might have had two or three exchanges with the researcher and the parents knew her as someone who had worked with their children. In reporting of the data, each theme presented had ample student and parent data to back up the conclusion. All four participants in each group must have said something in support of the theme to be included. The researcher also attempted to avoid generalizing based on 12 participants. Though the data are rich, the findings underscore that the sample is 12 African American students in one urban school district.

Summary of Chapter 3

This chapter detailed the methodology that was used to conduct the study about what African American students and their families need to know to participate in gifted and advanced academics coursework in high school. The study context, research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis were presented. The researcher’s philosophy that children can learn at a rigorous level influenced the research design. The findings from this study might inform AC ISD educators from the perspective of native-born African American families in the study district about what they know and understand about gifted and advanced academics programs in their children’s schools.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

The study posed the following questions:

1. What were the perspectives of native-born African American participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?

2. What were the perspectives of native-born African American family members of participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?

3. How did the perspectives of these students and family members align with one another?

African American students and their parents provided data through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and research memos. The participating students were considered as three groups, those enrolled in gifted programs (Group 1), those enrolled in AP programs but not identified as gifted (Group 2), and those enrolled in neither AP nor gifted programs (Group 3). The data were analyzed first by group and later across and between groups.

Due to the large amount of data generated as part of the study, a method was needed to produce summaries that reflected the topics most important to the groups of participants. Members of all three student groups tended to discuss the same themes; what differed among groups was the level of detail provided. For example, Groups 1 and 2 provided more detailed data about differences between GT/AP courses and general education courses that did Group 3, which had no experience with GT/AP. Consequently, Group 1 data yielded eight different subthemes on this topic while Group 3 offered only four. These differences in variety and intensity of subthemes were important in the part of the analysis that involved comparing the groups of students. Table 4 presents a list of themes that emerged in the interviews of students and serves as an organizer for the major part of the chapter in which each of the three groups of
students is introduced and summaries of results are presented in which themes are introduced in the order of Table 4, with attention to the appropriate subthemes. Next, the chapter presents a summary of the findings for the parent group. The last part of the chapter provides answers to the research questions based on consideration of the results from the appropriate groups of participants.

Table 4

Order of Themes and Sub-themes in Each Student Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
<th>Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differences Among GT/Pre-AP/General Education Denizens</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of work</td>
<td>Learning environment</td>
<td>Mindset</td>
<td>Feeling about self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindset</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Struggle in general education</td>
<td>How students felt in AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings about self</td>
<td>Academic challenge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual differences</td>
<td>Typical GT/AP class experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical GT/AP class experience</td>
<td>Impression of advanced work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the Future: College and Career</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing the work</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Preparing financially</td>
<td>Preparation for c grad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power through challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills learned in GT/AP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Community</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Combined with peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive peer relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative peer relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Peers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Combined with community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive family support</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative family interactions</td>
<td>Success at home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting guidelines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive family support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Encouraging to take challenges</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative family interactions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Encouraging to persevere</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of School Personnel</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Overcoming barriers with prep</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers and Struggles</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Misunderstandings and Unanswered Q</td>
<td>Not included for G1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Introduction of Groups 1, 2, and 3

Group 1 consisted of two males (a senior and a sophomore) and two females (both seniors). The two female participants were only children and one of the males had been an only child until middle school when his mother was married. The other male participant was part of a
family that included younger cousins. Other characteristics such as the grade level when they were first identified as gifted learners and the numbers of years attending ACISD schools are included in Table 5. In addition to taking GT and AP courses, these students also participated in general education courses. The kinds of general education courses (math, health, and electives) they had taken were not all elective in nature. Renae, Leonard, and LaTisha studied general education high school math and science, their self-described academic weaknesses, and Franklin took health.

Table 5

*Characteristics of Group 1 Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Years Apple Creek ISD</th>
<th>Grade of ID and in GT or AP</th>
<th>Number AP Courses Taken</th>
<th>General Education Courses Taken</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Renae</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1-4 partial 5-12 full</td>
<td>12th in program</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Math Health Electives</td>
<td>No siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Math Health Electives</td>
<td>No siblings; younger cousins in home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaTisha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3-12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Math Health Electives Anatomy</td>
<td>No siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Health Electives</td>
<td>No siblings until blended family status in MS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group 2 consisted of two males (both juniors) and two females (senior, sophomore). All participants had siblings. Other characteristics such as grades, participation in Pre-AP and AP, and years attending AC ISD schools are included in Table 6.
Table 6

*Characteristics of Group 2 Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Apple Creek ISD Grades</th>
<th>Pre-AP or AP Courses Taken</th>
<th>AP Courses Taken</th>
<th>General Education Courses Taken</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shonda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9-10 in AP</td>
<td>2 AP; Pre-AP core subjects</td>
<td>Web Tech, ROTC, Health</td>
<td>1 brother—lives in another state with dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aubrey</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6-12</td>
<td>Pre-AP 9-12; Pre-AP Algebra 1 in 8; 11-12 AP</td>
<td>5 AP; Pre-AP other core subjects</td>
<td>Drill Team, Anatomy</td>
<td>2 younger brothers in grades 8 and 9 in Apple Creek ISD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>K-11 except one year in charter school at age 7.</td>
<td>8-11 Pre-AP; 11 AP</td>
<td>2 AP in 11th grade for first time; Pre-AP other core subjects</td>
<td>Band, Health, Lifetime Nutrition and Wellness</td>
<td>2 older sisters—one married in Alabama and one at Midwestern State. 1 older brother in area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raymond</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3-11</td>
<td>GT 3-5; 6-11 Pre-AP and AP</td>
<td>3 AP; Pre-AP other core subjects</td>
<td>Art, Spanish, Athletics</td>
<td>Older brother and sister, six younger siblings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for non-academic interests, Shonda was new to AC ISD and had no history of interaction with her community outside of school. She said, “I just do my homework and that’s about it.” She participated in ROTC daily and Math Club bimonthly and had a job working with data online. Aubrey was very involved in several activities but monopolized by Drill Team. Likewise, Michael focused on band activities that commanded several hours a day outside school, especially in the fall marching band season. Raymond was a student athlete who played on the school basketball team.

Although Group 3 students had never participated in GT or AP courses, all had friends who did. When they discussed what they thought occurred in an advanced academics class versus a general education class, their perceptions were based on reports of their peers, general
information available, or informal presentations by counselors or teachers. Of the four, two who were sophomores said that they planned to take AP or Pre-AP classes in their junior years. The other two students were seniors, and one planned to attend a community college and the other, a four-year university. Table 7 provides some information about each student’s scholastic performance and time in AC ISD.

Table 7

**Characteristics of Group 3 Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Years in AC ISD/ GPA</th>
<th>Siblings’ educational experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destini</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6-12/3.0</td>
<td>Younger high school brother in the home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10/3.0</td>
<td>2 older sisters who do not live in the home: one in college and one lives with mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9-10/3.4</td>
<td>2 younger brothers that live with her and two step siblings not living in the home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6-12/2.45</td>
<td>Only child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences among GT/Pre-AP/AP/General Education Programs

A theme that emerged from data of all three student groups was the difference between the curriculum and its delivery in GT, Pre-AP, and AP as compared to general education programs. All students observed the same disparities between these experiences although Groups 1 and 2 had direct experiences in both general education and advanced classes and Group 3 did not. The differences they reported included the types of work, learning environments, mindsets of the student(s), and feelings about themselves. Participants perceived that the type of work for advanced academics students required both independence and collaboration in addressing high level thinking tasks at the college level. Lectures, reading, and note-taking, while considered “old school,” were perceived as expectations in AP classes.
The GT and AP students perceived the advanced academics class as fast-paced, focused, requiring student autonomy, demanding, and collegial while the general education classes were slow-paced, prescriptive, and unchallenging. The general education students qualified their courses as helpful, dependable, and accessible. The brief sections that follow further develop student observations of important differences.

According to Group 1, in the advanced academics courses students were expected to engage in a different kind of work—reading, note-taking, and mature and informed discussions. Expectations of independence seemed to permeate the advanced academics classroom. The general education classroom was more structured with teacher-led step-by-step learning. Renae recounted how these differences might impact the learning of the students in future classes. If students were not as prepared in courses leading to AP, they would likely struggle. Renae said, “My friends [who] were in honors [Pre-AP] world history, they would just get 100s and the teacher would model answers. And then they got into AP US History, and they had no idea what was going on.”

All four students in Group 2 had past and current experience in general education classrooms, and they noticed a difference in the types and amount of work given in AP versus general education classes. Shonda and Michael had taken only one and two AP classes respectively, in which they were both currently enrolled, and since their interviews occurred in late fall of the school year, they did not yet have a full experience of these classes. Interviewed in the spring of his junior year, Raymond had almost finished three AP classes. Aubrey had taken AP courses in her junior year and was taking several more as a senior, so she had the most experience of this group and the most detailed information to offer. Despite varying degrees of
experience, students in Group 2 noted the same characteristics as Group 1, but the transitional experience was more intense for Group 2 students.

Shonda discussed the kind of thinking that the students were required to do in an AP class. She observed, “They really ask you to explain your reasons behind your answers [rather] than just putting something down on the paper.” She saw that the thinking nurtured in an AP class was guided by the way the class protocols were set up. In preparing for assessments, Shonda noted that in

Health, you mostly get like worksheets and fill out material from the book. It’s boring and easy and you can learn the material on your own. But in other classes it’s like better engaged and I have to challenge my brain more rather than just skimming the text and looking for the answers because in AP classes I actually have to read the entire thing. We understand and analyze something for an essay prompt.

Distinct from Group 1, the AP participants in Group 2 repeatedly discussed the amount of work required in an AP class versus a general education class. They agreed that independence was required to manage the AP workload. Aubrey had figured out through trial and error how to navigate the requirements because failure was not acceptable in her family.

You have to do a lot of work in class; you also have to do a lot of work outta class. That’s supposed to be due the next day—same stuff that you did in class is due the next day so like I feel like I’m prepared for the most part…I go to tutoring a lot because my mom does not tolerate the failing thing…I am going to do everything I can. We do not fail. That’s not what we do.

Tutoring, completing work at home, and using time wisely were tactics Group 2 students employed.
Students in Group 3 reported that the procedures for a general education classes were similar for all subjects, rarely varied, and math was the only class that had much homework. Deborah said, “We do bellringers, and we take notes. And then the teacher does examples on the board, and then we try it for ourselves.” The few variations included occasionally working with partners. In world history, for example, students watched Brainpop movies and took notes. The teacher often provided an outline of the notes for the students. While they watched the related video, they filled in the blanks of the outline with material from either the film or the projected power point. Deborah described another class in which the students started the period by catching up on their work from the day before. Students were routinely able to finish almost all work during the class period.

This pattern of not having extensive amounts of work began in elementary school. Malik remembered that “it wasn’t really much hard work. Just basic math, basic reading. We used to have fun. We drew stuff like coloring, art, all that basic stuff.” And Group 3 agreed that the pattern of “easy work” continued throughout high school. One of the seniors, Destini, described a class in which there was time to complete and turn in your work. Students had “at least two days to get it in before the end of the six weeks. It really helps you out. You will not have to rush yourself because they understood that you have like eight classes during the day.” At the same time, Destini talked about English class where “we do Shakespeare, watch the movie, we do worksheets, and vocabulary. That’s like a really easy class,” and she emphasized that students could easily get their work finished in class. The participants repeatedly referred to power points, worksheets, bookwork, notes, and free time when discussing a general education class. Group 3 students did not experience a sense of urgency in their classes like they perceived existed in an advanced class.
An example of the GT/AP learning environment provided by Group 1 included academic conversations on topics that were elusive in a general education. An example was a conversation about Michelle Obama, nutrition, and its impact on school children. Leonard described how the experienced AP students involved in this discussion had relished the high level of thinking required and the relevance of the topic. They were able to contribute knowledgeably and were genuinely engaged. Students who were taking an AP class for the first time made factual errors such as calling Michelle Obama the President and were not able to participate effectually in the conversation. Group 1 perceived their elevated reading, writing, and conversation as college-level work. They also stated that the work completed in general education courses prior to participating in AP did not prepare students for the higher standard.

Leonard observed that in Pre-AP, like AP, “You are expected to know a lot more, just like working on your feet. You are expected to know how to figure things out.” Leonard had experienced the difference in tenth grade as he moved from a regular world geography class to AP World History and had a “reality check.” LaTisha observed that AP classes were set up to foster independence and “learn it [AP U.S. History] yourself. And write all of the things that you thought were important versus…regular history: there was just like a power point and you just wrote down what the power point said.”

Students understood the demanding protocols and expectations of AP teachers as caring about them and their futures. The teachers were perceived as interested in the students’ intellectual and personal growth. Franklin exemplified this when he talked about the strict standards his AP World History teacher upheld. The teacher told students they must work two hours outside class for every class attended. Franklin noted the teacher taught bell-to-bell.
He will say you can’t pack up until the bell rings. You know, in some classes the teachers don’t care. Five ‘till, get your stuff ready and all that. I feel like his class, it makes you a better person. It makes you better prepared for college, and I think if you’re all in for getting that AP credit, it’s worth it.

Group 2 agreed with these perceptions of Group 1 and added that the AP teachers often had more lenient or relaxed demeanors while teaching the college-level material. Group 2 was very clear, however, that a relaxed attitude of the teacher did not impact the intellectual and performance demands of the AP class. Shonda shared that AP teachers were a “little more lenient about when we can talk because they know we work and we can be trusted to do something, and sometimes even Mr(s). _____ will joke with us…but we know when to get back to work.” She used the term “trustworthy” to describe her AP classmates and added that the joking element was part of an effective teaching strategy in an AP classroom. Shonda had attended several schools in Texas and other states and perceived her experience in AC ISD to be rigorous. She stated that her high school was “one of the best schools…because they actually push students to strive for their best rather than giving them a grade and telling them to go onto the next grade.” Part of the cadre of successful strategies Group 2 employed was the independent management of deadlines and assignment.

Aubrey offered an example of a typical AP class. She was required to manage several types of assignments with varying deadlines for just one AP class. She said,

I read until she [teacher] tells us what we are supposed to do, take notes; she hands us papers or puts in our planners what we are supposed to do, like take notes. We read a passage; we answer questions. She kinda gives us different [guidelines]; she’s good about “You know you can do this,” “turn it in on this day.” “I am going to give you this, but
this is not due until this.” So it kinda gives you a variety of stuff to do, I guess, so I’m working on that. I’m working on what’s due next week…So I spend about 45 minutes typically because the first ten minutes you just kind of talk and get into the class basically what’s going to happen. So then 45 minutes doing that; 20 minutes doing vocab[ulary], or answering the questions, and then the bell rings.

Aubrey characterized this and other AP classes as face-paced, independent, multi-faceted and multi-layered.

Michael considered the major difference between AP and general education was the faster pacing of the courses. He just did his work, thinking it was like every other class. He added, “It’s not that I decided to do it. I decided not to fail. When I fail, both of my parents they go, ‘You’re grounded. Don’t leave your room.’ You know, ‘You stay after school until you sort this all out.’” Group 2 talked about parent expectations of acceptable academic performance while Groups 1 and 3 did not talk much about the pressure from parents.

Aubrey’s transition to AP from Pre-AP and general education classes was a challenge that made her concerned about her grades. She remembered the difficulty, fast-pace, and volume of work as extensively different in AP. For her success, Aubrey needed to go

Step by step….That’s how I need to learn….That’s part of the reason why I didn’t want to be in AP classes because I know…they treat you like you…have more responsibility, but when you’re like a lower class, they…baby you. I was like, “That’s fine; you can baby me. I don’t care.” But they go like step by step, and they didn’t do that in like AP classes so I thought it was really hard.

All Group 2 students recommended taking AP classes, especially if the student were prepared. Michael perceived that “Educationally it will just benefit your grades overall.”
Sometimes, however, the students did not feel prepared for AP. They found the Pre-AP classes were focused but finite, ensuring that a certain amount of work was accomplished, but not pushing students to their maximum capacities. Michael said that in a Pre-AP class if the students completed the assigned work for the day, they were allowed free time in class, but in the AP class, “they [the teacher] just begin. And we all have to be quiet or we will miss what happens.”

Aubrey had several transitions from less rigorous to more challenging work in her educational journey. When she moved to AC ISD, she moved from a less challenging district so she found immediate challenge, recalling, “This school was more structured and doing good stuff.” Her next increase in rigor occurred in grade 9 when she made the transition to both high school and Pre-AP courses. Before that, school work was easy for her, but afterward, the teachers required more independence.

According to the Group 1 participants, the mindset of the students regarding their futures and their own intelligence also differed by school program. They perceived the advance academics students as wanting to achieve more and embrace challenging work, which made them feel smarter. They viewed the general education students as attempting to do as little as possible and not learning as much. About students in the general education classes, Franklin generalized, “I think it’s simply because they don’t want to do the work.”

An aspect of their experience discussed by all Group 1 participants was their desire to be surrounded by people who wanted to learn and grow. Leonard claimed,

I never, never wanted to sit in a classroom with people who do not want to be there again…I heard “If you are the smartest person in the room, you are probably in the wrong room.” I said, “Hmmm…Maybe I should change my environment.” It did not appeal to
me being in a class where there wasn’t anyone that I could talk to and anyone [who] understood my interests who would want to go into more depth into things.

Group 2 shared that the positive climate of the AP classroom embraced the common goals and focus of the students. This climate fostered school behavior that contributed to the academic climate. Aubrey celebrated that the students in her advanced classes possessed similar mindsets. She observed, “Because I am in a higher level class, they [other students] are… more intelligent. They know how to stay focused. They’re not all distracted. We are all in there for the same reason. We are trying to pass the AP test.”

Aubrey added that students in AP classes were not disrespectful to other students or their teachers. Aubrey did not presume that she knew everything about college and her future. She had an inkling of but did not have all the answers. This growth mindset supported her efforts to try and work through AP classes.

Another difference between advanced academics and general education students perceived by Group 1 was in behavior. Renae recounted that when she was in a general education class in sixth grade, “It was so rowdy because it was, like, sixth grade, and we were getting into that ‘we’re different, we’re older,’ and I was like, ‘I don’t like that,’ so then they switched me to honors.” All four participants noted that the students in the general education classes did not do their work in class or as homework, they copied assignments, and they were satisfied with just getting by. Renae claimed,

They are not focused on school…they would be like, “Hey, did you do the homework last night?” and then I would watch them copy each other’s homework. And then they would have some drama, like, “Hey, look at this Youtube video,” “Look at this girl on Facebook,” “on Instragram,” and “Let’s make fun of her.”
Once students qualified for or were successful in advanced academics classrooms, pressure to remain existed. The need to continue to feel successful, intelligent, and accomplished supported the daily efforts of students to succeed in the advanced environment. Choosing not to participate after successful inclusion was perceived as failure for the students in Group 1. Participants repeatedly discussed that general education students did not want to work or be challenged. They just wanted to get their diplomas and move on.

Experiences in advanced academics also impacted students outside of school. Once the Group 1 students had participated in advanced classes, they reported that other class experiences paled in comparison. LaTisha underscored the difference the GT/AP student brought to the classroom when she said, “All my teachers…knew that GT kids aren’t just regular kids. We understand things, and we want to learn about the real world and all that and like try to prepare.”

Groups 1 and 2 reported that advanced academics curriculum and its delivery often created stress that sometimes originated from parents and teachers, but more often emanated from the students themselves. Student wanted to perform well, and not being prepared for AP classes impacted their feelings about themselves and their performance. All Group 1 and 2 participants had other obligations to manage along with AP demands. They thought some of the stress derived from lack of preparation for the rigors of the advanced class, not having practiced responding to open-ended questions, and not having been given exact answers to questions used in the assessments. Renae explained,

You can prep for an essay, but you don’t know what the topic is going to be when you take the test. It’s different for history because you it’s like you cover so much, and you never know what they are going to say, and what if it’s over something you did not cover. So I think it was just the stress, and it’s like that in any AP…they want to pass the class
because they did not want to disappoint their teacher [and]…you had to really learn. I think that’s why people got really stressed out.

Even when students struggled, they knew that they should stay in the challenging courses. Leonard talked about a time when he wanted to change to a general education class. He asked his mother to allow him to drop a challenging class with a 67 average so he could take an easy class and earn 100s. The mom did not allow it. Because of that experience, Leonard grew to believe that he should not avoid hard work but embrace challenge. With the advantage of retrospect, the three seniors realized the value of working through challenging AP courses.

LaTisha admitted the help that specific classes and teachers provided had taught her to focus. Her freshman year she did not work hard because it was easy and “grades are handed to you.” But she took an AP English Language class and realized she had to make the effort to learn and do well. All four students admitted battling the temptation to put less effort into school. Procrastination, poor time management, and fatigue tempted the students to perform below potential. Not all students were focused all of the time.

Groups 1 and 2 perceived that general education students spent their time on the social aspects of teen life, and school was not a primary focus. While students in Group 1 also participated in social events and enjoyed being social at school, they perceived their social interactions did not interfere with the intended learning at school. The students in Group 3 shared stories that countered some of the impressions that GT and AP students offered. Group 3 students shared academic struggles they faced and were able to overcome. Students who struggled in a general education class seemed mostly to rely on the teacher for support. Students asked questions during class and were aware of tutoring opportunities. Two of the four students struggled with passing end of course exams, and they were jubilant about their ultimate success.
Group 3 students learned to ignore misbehavior by peers so they could focus on their academic work. Students from all three groups exhibited pride in their academic work and accomplishments. Group 2 talked about a sense of pride that they had successfully transformed to become successful AP students. They had navigated the AP curriculum and assessments to earn high school and potentially college credit.

Aubrey was the most experienced of Group 2 with AP and the most prolific speaker. She offered numerous examples of the themes that emerged from the study. All participants presented the importance of self-efficacy, but three did not directly discuss it, offering instead evidences of its development. Aubrey underscored the importance of self-efficacy in the learning process and indicated that she had not always believed in her own abilities, but that belief had become her new norm. She described her evolution as follows:

I think you have to believe that you can do it because I didn’t believe I could do it, but then like over time I was okay, I think I can, you know….I can’t hang out with people who don’t even do their work. And you know they struggle, and they are just like, “You know what? I don’t care.” “Well, I care; that can’t be me. Surround yourself with good people, good influences”…with people who push you forward.

Part of Aubrey’s new understanding of success was her ability to seek the support she needed. She had come to understand that asking questions was as a key to accomplishing her goals. She observed, “You have to have hard work and dedication so the teacher sees that and they know that you are working, you are asking questions. Don’t be ashamed to ask questions.” In retrospect she also understood the inability to ask questions and seek the support she needed as reasons she had dropped her first AP class. Raymond, also, exhibited an emerging understanding of self-efficacy. He scheduled every interview around his tutoring sessions at
school. He even called to cancel the first interview because he had to make an appointment to see a teacher that afternoon instead. All three groups indicated assurance of their accomplishments in spite of struggles.

The students in Group 3 did not seem concerned that they had not taken advanced academics courses. However, Charles and Deborah said AP courses were in their futures. Deborah said that without AP, she would feel, “I’d just be like regular and not having like more knowledge in the course.” On the other hand, Malik seemed relieved that he had decided not to take AP. He had friends who had not been successful in AP, and Malik wanted to avoid stress.

Malik was the only student in Group 3 concerned about stress, but all participants in the group perceived that advanced classes required elimination of other activities. Malik said AP students studied and worked with no break, believing that “in AP classes, they still give you work no matter how much you finish it.” Destini had some friends who had participated in AP classes talk about how “all the work gotta be turned in cuz like it’s hard, a top class. You have to pass it, or they’ll drop you out, you know… they have to work hard to keep their grades up because of the AP.” Fear about the challenges and work load had kept these two students out of AP classes, and no one in Group 3 seemed to possess negative feelings about not participating.

All 12 students shared various academic challenges they had encountered, and they supported the idea of all students being pushed academically. What that push looked like differed by group. Groups 1 and 2 considered AP courses challenging, and Group 3 thought students doing their best qualified as being pushed. Group 1 wished that one rigorous program existed for all students. However, they supported the existence of two programs if the option were to have only the less rigorous path. LaTisha lamented, “We have to have a separate group for the higher level thinking students. It’s just kind of sad. We should all be at a high level.” The Group 1
students perceived that parents should know the differences in course levels before students signed up so they could support their students. Franklin expressed that the two levels of classes were necessary because students could choose what kind of students they would be. He believed that students choose the kind of education they receive and can choose to work hard if they desire. He did indicate, however, that sometimes students do not understand what they are agreeing to undertake with an AP class and can “be scarred by it.” Group 1 also noted differences among the students within the advanced academics. They stated that GT students, who had to qualify for placement in GT courses with achievement, aptitude, and portfolio scores, and Pre-AP students, who could choose the open-access courses, performed differently. Franklin compared the Pre-AP and GT students in his geometry class, noting most of the homework nonperformers were Pre-AP students who hindered the progress of the class. Franklin concluded that “If you are not going to put forth the effort to be better, then you shouldn’t try to stop other people from being better because of it.” All of Group 1 noticed disparity between GT and Pre-AP students in skills, work ethic, and commitment.

Among the four students in Group 1, Renae stood out as not having been academically challenged through all of her schooling. She was the exception in the group that thought AP classes were a challenge. Renae said,

I guess I would say it’s all been really, really, like, lax, I guess, like it hasn’t’ been too hard. I haven’t really been, like, challenged….I don’t know, I guess school like has been, like, for me, just kind of disappointing, I guess, you know because I always wanted to get more out of it than I got.

The lack of challenge contributed to her inclination to procrastinate because she could finish the work at the last minute and still perform well. Students in Group 1 talked about time
management and prioritizing activities for which they saw numerous possibilities in and outside school.

Students in Group 2 believed in the opportunity that the advanced classes provided. Michael said he would encourage students to take Pre-AP and AP classes because everyone has the potential to perform at a higher level. He said, “If you’re at the higher level, you can just try different AP courses that would be more of a challenge to you. [It] is always good for people. That’s the reason half of the students are in AP courses.” [Actually 25% of students in AC ISD took at least one AP class.] Michael recommended that if a current class were not challenging enough that student should sign up for an AP course, monitoring the experience, and then accepting support if needed. He saw this as preferable to not trying because of fear of the unknown.

Michael mentioned several times that he perceived advanced classes as requiring students to be independent. He asked, “Isn’t that what high school is trying to make you do? To make you to be independent when you go to college, and graduate college, and start a life of your own?” He seemed to perceive this forced independence in a negative way, however. Teachers expected him to go out and find the information he needed to complete assignments because the teachers ran out of time in class. The teachers required independent learning, and the students had not been prepared for it. Like Michael, all of the students in Groups 2 and 3 seemed to lack some pedagogical information about GT and, to some extent, advanced programs.

Group 1 participants discussed the intellectual differences between themselves and their non-GT classmates. In ACISD, the service design for GT students included self-contained classrooms for grades 3-8 followed by GT, Pre-AP, and then AP in Grades 9-12. Consequently, many GT students first took classes with Pre-AP students (who mistakenly called these courses
“honors”) and AP students in high school. For Group 1, intellectual differences had been observed as early as kindergarten. They often discussed students’ having strength in one area and weakness in another, such as math. Each student remembered when she or she was first identified as a gifted learner. Renae had attended schools in Texas and Mississippi before settling in Texas permanently. She recalled reading at the third grade level in kindergarten. Both Franklin and Leonard remembered being tested to qualify for gifted services because an educator recognized how they performed differently from other students. When Leonard joined the district in fifth grade, he stood out among his classmates and was noticed by a teacher. He recalled,

It was a math teacher. I corrected her a lot. I guess she was talking to someone one day, and she said, “Maybe we need to test him to see if he’s supposed to be in this class.” They gave me the gifted placement test, and I scored in the top 90th percentile. I think it was higher than that, but I don’t want to gloat. [laughs] They were like, “Don’t even go back into the classroom.”

Their accounts of qualifying for gifted services had a lasting impression on these four students. In their accounts of identification for gifted services, each talked about an adult noticing they were not engaged in grade-level coursework or performed at a higher level than peers and following the procedures to include them in the GT program.

All Group 1 and 2 students noted that the typical advanced class involved lecture, but also included student-centered activities such as group work, options, and outside assignments. The assessments in AP were different from those in general education classes. Group 1 distinguished a typical GT/AP class most clearly as Renae explained: students had to learn the material to receive good grades. Students often worked together to support one another in understanding the multifaceted content that required synthesis of several topics, previous
learning, and multiple materials. Renae said, “Like one question it would be like this is question number one, and then like part A, B, C, D… We have 50 questions. And we work on that for two weeks.” This type of thinking and organized approach to showing your learning was unique to GT and AP courses. Students had varying impressions of rigorous coursework. While most of the associations were positive in nature, students in Group 1 presented some negative attributes of challenge.

Several negatives were associated with AP courses for Group 1. The work load for unprepared or over-committed students contributed to the stress. For Renae, the situational stress was personal as she did not want to disappoint the teacher. “You had to really learn. I think that’s why people got really stressed out. People were getting really bad grades… she gave us everything, but you had to put your own effort into it too.” Group 1 students perceived that students who did not want to work did not think about how they were limiting their future choices. Franklin believed that these students had not learned that “This is your life; you can live it the way you want; putting more work in now… comes out later. And it’s usually very good.” The concept of delayed gratification for future gains seemed clear to Group 1 students.

In addition to the academic accomplishments and skills garnered, positive results of participation in GT/AP included several personal and professional attributes sought by Group 1 such as elf-efficacy and the ability to focus. Renae shared how self doubt transformed into belief in her ability to tackle something in which she previously lacked proficiency.

I was really scared of taking this class [AP] at first, but I did it and passed it, and if I didn’t pass it, at least I learned something. I think that’s what you get…. I think you would gain like that determination. You can be proud of yourself for passing. And you feel like you can do it somewhere else like when you get to college.
The transferability of being able to tackle a seemingly insurmountable challenge was an important element of growth for Renae. All Group 1 students expressed similar perceptions of increased confidence in facing future academic challenges after successfully navigating AP courses. Leonard also noted responding well to being academically challenged, learning how to persevere and liking being recognized for accomplishments. He said, “If I can read through that US history text that’s 60 years old, I can basically focus through anything.” LaTisha talked about the application of skills learned in AP to future job responsibilities. Franklin talked about his recognition for a superior independent study project as fostering confidence in his own ability.

GT/AP students cited intellectual and psychological advantages of taking rigorous courses as preparation for life after high school. These advantages included being able to work hard, not give up, seek support, and realizing you can be successful with challenging work and situations.

Students in Group 2 described a less demanding, collegial and independent environment in a general education as compared to advanced academics. Aubrey shared a typical day in her general education anatomy class, characterizing it as slow.

She tells us what we are going to do; we are taking notes; we do flash questions. Every flash question you answer, you get a bonus point on the next test so it’s pretty cool. So we take notes…and then we get five minutes left at the end of class so I just kind of chill. All members of Group2 had similar stories about general education classes that they had taken and seemed concerned about a lack of urgency in that environment.

Group 3 students did not offer descriptions of AP classes, but Charles had some generally accurate ideas about advanced courses. He said, “It’s not basic. The Pre-AP classes are a little bit harder. I think one of these classes you get dual credits. I’m not sure if you have to pay for that. I
know only core classes are Pre-AP.” Ultimately he thought AP classes were the same as a “basic class” with a little bit more volume, challenging, homework, and more difficult tests.

Because they had not taken an AP class, Group 3 students had misconceptions about AP classes, Malik had some misconceptions about the outcomes of taking AP classes. He believed that advanced academics students were “guaranteed a good scholarship for college” and established connections for careers from their AP experiences. He perceived that taking advanced classes indicated that “you’re a good, hard worker, and they [college admissions and future employers] know they can rely on you to get the work done.” He also thought that the high schools had a competition with each other regarding AP. Charles thought AP teachers asked more challenging questions and assigned more complex homework. He did not think the content of the class or homework would vary much among English, science, or math courses, and he showed he did not really understand the differences between Pre-AP and AP by referring to geometry as AP Geometry, which does not exist, although Pre-AP Geometry does. This misnaming occurred several times during his interviews. He also did not realize “electives” like Art and Music Theory had AP classes.

Even though Charles did not understand all aspects a AP class would entail, he seemed to understand the impact that taking an advanced class could offer. He would encourage participation in AP classes because he did not understand why “basic classes” existed when taking AP could help with your career. Deborah appeared to understand that advanced academics courses could give her a “head start on the courses I’ll take in college.” She would encourage taking AP for students who “feel ready to take it, and do what’s best for you.” She had indirectly been given an opportunity to take AP this year when she noticed its inclusion on a list of available courses but opted not to take it because she was working on math deficiencies, and “I
felt like it would be harder to take an AP class,…They did give me the opportunity to take an AP class.” The advanced course was on the choice sheet, but no one directly encouraged this student to take an AP or Pre-AP class in an area of strength.

Turning Challenges into Success

After Group 1 students had been qualified for gifted services, they reported welcoming the opportunity to participate in more rigorous academic programs. Leonard found encouragement in participation in these courses because “they challenge you in ways that you have not been challenged before.” He added,

You definitely are pushed. You definitely are made to do things that you would not under ordinary circumstances do. It’s like a workout for your brain…Then you figure out: “I can do this. I can do this” And it’s not hard; it’s just that I need to find the resources that I have to do it.

When asked what it took to be successful in GT and AP courses, the idea of intelligence or aptitude did not surface for any group. Students repeatedly talked about doing the work, powering through challenging moments by focusing, managing their time, and gaining a willingness to do well. Group 1 students had decided they were going to do well by using their resources, communicating, and showing up every day. All four arrived at school early and had a routine that set up the day. One even called it a bell ringer for her. She knew that she needed to get there and do something academic before the day began so she would be ready. In addition to choosing rigorous courses, all four students in Group 1 chose to be involved after school in activities including tutoring others, band, clubs, community service, or athletics.

AP students in Group 2 repeatedly discussed the impact that hard work had on their success in AP classes. This topic emerged as a topic itself and within several themes such as
positive family and peer support and skills learned in AP. Group 2 students reiterated that hard work was required for success in AP which had taught them what hard work actually entailed. These participants worked hard. Their peers and friends in AP worked hard. They were dedicated to success.

An example of peers interacting during every available school minute to assure success was shared by Aubrey in her description of a study moment during a break in drill team.

I talked to one of my friends; she’s in Ms. ____’s class with me and in Mr. _____’s class. We work on whatever it is, whatever assignment. It’s like, “Can you help me with this, please?” Or, “What did you get for this one?” “When is this due?”

Aubrey also used the resources teachers offered to fill her understanding gaps. In speaking about a Calculus class that she struggled in, Aubrey showed how she utilized her self-talk to advantage.

I usually struggle…So I’m kind of winding down thinking, “Okay so he’s done with the lesson. I’ll look at it real quick. Do I understand it?” Probably not. But I have to come in and take a test after this. At 3:25 I end up staying in [his] class because he does not have an 8th period class. Since I have senior out, I usually stay in and retake a test or do a practice…until 4:15 when school is actually over.

Her collaboration with peers continued in the evening with texts, sending pictures of how the problems are solved, determining the points of confusion, and studying together via technology.

Michael surrounded himself with other students who were trying to successfully navigate rigorous coursework. Since most of his friends were in AP, he said, “for them it’s just stay and
pass in the class, just take the notes. That’s basically the only thing that’s kept me passing throughout this year. And, they think that AP courses are definitely a challenge for them.”

Tenth grader Shonda had learned that achievement in advanced academics came with dedication and a year-long timeline. She appreciated that the effort required to do well in an AP class did not mean you were automatically going to college. One aspect of successful participation was willingness to complete coursework on weekends and holidays. Shonda elaborated, “Well, the teachers will give you homework on holidays…because there’s more to be done in AP classes, so they have to spread it out over holiday and personal time for kids to understand all of the material.”

Renae talked about her work ethic being a deliberate choice. In discussing a particular teacher, opportunities offered by that teacher, and student reactions to them, she underscored the element of student effort that led to success. Renae described a teacher who invested the “same amount of effort into each student because she wants them all to pass” and advised a student to be willing to improve, to get better. She explained, “You don’t have to just have the intelligence. You have to have the work ethic….You should not waste any time. Just like don’t procrastinate. You have to have the will power to finish everything.”

Contrarily, Renae perceived that students sometimes took short cuts and focused on grades, stating “The goal is based more on a grade. That’s why people cheat. When teachers start to get lazy, that’s the problem because they are the ones who are supposed to motivate us.” She suggested that when teachers did not pursue authentic learning for their students, students took short cuts and were motivated by extrinsic elements such as grades. Renae reiterated that a student needed “to be willing to motivate himself” and “just do your own work.”
Group 2 students thoughtfully shared why doing the work and organizing their time were valid approaches to success in advanced academics. Students also shared their perceptions of the role of the teacher as a source of the message that hard work led to success. Shonda appreciated the rigor of her current school as compared to previous schools attended. She perceived that teachers were preparing students for future performance. Group 2 felt that teachers taught more than you would ever need and pushed you harder than you currently needed, but you are prepared for future courses. However, Group 2 participants perceived these demands were not out of reach but merely took more time and effort on the part of the student. Learning to work hard and manage time even when you preferred other activities led to success. Michael said that he did not necessarily like working hard. He regretted that he sometimes lost sleep, “like the times I have to stay up late just to work on the constant projects, you know, like the 2,000 word essay, the chapter of notes that I have to study for, and the tests.” Aubrey recognized that one of the most valuable lessons and skills she had learned was how to push herself. She mentioned numerous times that she had learned the value of hard work and pushing though difficult moments. Shonda described a process of metacognition where “I just gauge how much time I need to do for each thing, and if it doesn’t work, I just adjust it,” trying different strategies until something worked.

Students in Group 2 practiced independence daily in awaking, getting to school and participating actively without reminders or assistance from family. They talked about how structured schedules and expectations from both school and home had a positive impact on their performance. Shonda awoke, used public transportation to get to school 45 minutes before the day began, and reviewed her homework. Aubrey arrived by 6:45 each morning to participate in her drill team practice. Michael set alarms for 6:00, 6:30, and 7:00 and then complained that he
had to wait for a cousin to be ready before he could go to school. He was able to maneuver the challenges of the day but seemed to begrudge the concessions he made to be successful.

After-school activities for Shonda included some math team activities or going straight home at 5:00 and starting her four classes of homework and then working until 8:00. She took some breaks, including eating dinner. After she finished her homework, she watched TV or worked on her online job. Any sacrifices that Shonda made were perceived by her as a benefit. She saw AP classes as an “opportunity to be able to better educate myself because if I have a problem in life, those skills I learned in AP courses like critical thinking and problem solving [will]…help me in real life.”

The participants in student Group 3 understood that advanced courses required extra time, effort, and dedication compared to the general education curriculum. Deborah acknowledged that advanced academic students had to invest the appropriate amount of time to “know what you’re doing and be smart in that class” Malik cautioned to not “let the little things get in the way” of the dedication and time required to ensure success in advanced classes. Destini offered that Pre-AP and AP students must stay focused, pass the class, and “make sure your work is turned in on time.” Charles emphasized organization of assignments and “making sure you’re studying the criteria that you have maybe over a test or a quiz,” ensuring understanding, not just completion. He noted that students in general education classes in which the teacher graded merely for completion often did not master the concepts.

Part of student success in advanced courses was perceived by Deborah as involving use of available resources. She reported that she would enlist the help of the teacher, her mother, and the internet for homework support. When prompted, she also added friends to her list of support
sources when struggling with school work. All students reported that regular attendance and regular homework completion in the evening were part of their successful practices.

Group 1 and 2 students discussed powering through academic challenges by using available resources including time, materials, and people. Leonard employed a, “willingness to do well…communicate with your teachers…[and] power through it.” LaTisha observed that “you have to guide yourself” and wished someone had told her to continue to strive for excellence and not look for the easy path. “You are always going to need to strive more. Like if you get a 90, go for the 100. It’s always about working more. That’s what I would tell them, because I wish someone had told me that.” Franklin echoed those pieces of advice for success in rigorous courses. He talked about dedication and independence, the importance of completing the work, reflecting,

It’s really independent. And if you don’t do the notes over night, he [AP teacher] doesn’t ask you about them….The teacher only talks about it as if you’ve learned that stuff already because you were supposed to do it the night before…. “You gotta get your big boy pants on” because you really don’t get assistance from the teacher unless you go after school and you take the time to try to make yourself better in that course.

Franklin took the ideas of intelligence and work ethic one step farther when he discussed the point at which natural intelligence and talent might not serve the student without expenditure of effort. He said,

The same amount of work you put in is the same amount of reward that you get out of it. I think that’s very true. It’s very relevant to sports. You know the kids who train all summer to play football? They are usually our All-Stars, and natural talent only goes…[so far], even in academics….And I think eventually hard work will overtake
natural talent. And at that point is when people who work hard become more successful than the people who just go through the motions because they have natural talent.

Group 1 students felt that poverty or lack of knowledge or opportunity created barriers to success in academics. Because of the low socio-economic status of the district, students, teachers, and administrators often discussed doing well as opportunity for college support. Groups 1 and 2 overtly talked about their concern about paying for college. LaTisha was also concerned about poverty and the economy as barriers for the entire community. She wondered whether students in wealthier districts earned higher AP scores and knew how to “be in GT” better than those less wealthy districts. Leonard and Franklin saw lacking self confidence and relevant life experiences as barriers to participation in advanced courses.

In all three interviews, Aubrey shared her passion about having a work ethic and never giving up as keys to her positive experiences in advance academics. She used the language of resilience and growth as she talked about her journey, stating a major element of success in AP is Patience because it’s not going to come to you just right there and then….I had to work, and I had to like really think about it. “Okay, so this is what you’ll be having to do,” and you’ll be like, “Yes. Okay, and then I do this, right?” And it’s just like yes, and so I say okay. It took time for me to get it, not just immediately.

The authentic quality of Aubrey’s insights rang true as she repeated the same message across the interviews: if you want to achieve, the formula was “hard work, dedication, staying focused, and being surrounded by the people who will push you forward and help you to achieve the goals that you want to achieve.” Aubrey reminded other students that no one else could create this type of outlook for you, and without it, your future is limited.
All students in Groups 1 and 2 recommended finding help when needed. Michael said to find “people who can help you.” He had learned that even if the current situation were not ideal, a person should not give up. The eight participants in advanced courses did not shy away from more challenging work. In fact, they often called it engaging and used sets of strategies to access rigorous assignments. One strategy Shonda used involved active reading. She did not give up when she read but did not immediately understand a challenging text. Shonda said:

If you read a paragraph and you understand the words but you can’t articulate on how they go together, then you haven’t really…grasped the concepts. Well, I have to read a paragraph more or multiple times if there’s something that I don’t understand about it. And then, eventually it will click for me.

Reflecting on what they had gained by participating in advanced classes, Group 1 celebrated the following: work ethic, accepting and working through challenges, and balancing responsibilities. The skills developed are the same skills students perceived as needed for success.

Renae offered that the AP experience provided a “mindset where you can’t slack anymore…It’s like AP is as hard as you can get so it puts this idea in your head that if I can do good in AP, then I can do good in anything.” That lesson of the advantage of perseverance did not come naturally. It took time. Leonard talked about that evolution of understanding which he partially attributed to the fact that he had many family members who had participated in AP classes.

Before, I didn’t think my mother actually understood how much I was actually doing. But then I realized that my mom knew exactly how much I was doing, and she was only
trying to try to get me to go the extra mile….My family, yeah, we are pretty much an AP family. Uh, I know my aunt, uncles, and mom participated in AP classes.

Leonard was able to understand his change in attitude about rigorous coursework and its place in his future by his senior year in high school. For Franklin, the sophomore participant, who was living through the transition to more challenging coursework, this advantage was apparent. He realized that most other sophomores had not yet come to the realization that

People who put their life into something, they get something out of it. And you know some of the kids here…have always put in half effort and that’s what they’ve gotten out of it. And I think that’s why some of those kids say, “Oh, that teacher’s bad, and that class isn’t good, and that wasn’t helpful.”…They didn’t see it…[as] beneficial to them in the long run.

In addition to specific skills like accessing lectures, taking useful notes, and applying prior experiences to their college-level learning in a proactive way, participants appreciated their developing abilities to accept and work through challenges and to balance responsibilities. Leonard noted,

If you do something that is uncomfortable every day, eventually you will get used to being uncomfortable. If you do something every day that is difficult, you will get used to that difficulty….You really just have to have a willingness to do well.

LaTisha reiterated that learning the balance of responsibilities and being able to work through the related problem was important for the future, especially with a career. Group 1 participants perceived the contributions to their success in advanced academics courses as the same qualities that distinguished advanced courses from general education.
Focus on the Future: College and Career

Groups 1 and 2 fully discussed the impact of AP on their future and especially its support in both getting into college and navigating college-level work with some attention to its support for a career. Renae and LaTisha were applying to college in August through October of senior year. Renae “was trying to find something that would make me stand out when…apply[ing] for college.” LaTisha perceived that to get into a good college she had to be in GT and AP “because it was better” and showed she was “able to do a lot of things.” All eight students viewed knowing how to be successful while in college as a reason to participate in advanced courses. They saw college success as a conduit for a successful life. LaTisha shared that this pathway modeled “how adults work and how we needed to act that way.”

Franklin, who had taken two AP classes, noted his parents regularly supported this AP class choice as preparation for college, noting

I think that’s all they talk about actually. Getting into college and doing very good in life. That’s just the humanistic nurturing ways that you want your kids to have better than what you have….I feel like having a college degree would make me a successful person….I’d be more likely to get a job that I wanted with a college degree.

Different from Group 2, Group 1 participants tended to choose AP classes as exploratory pathways to determine what they might study in college or what might be their strengths. Renae took AP classes in areas of strength as a way to determine what her minor in college might be. Leonard thought taking certain AP courses “might get me into an academic program that is more specialized or better at what it is that I what it is I want to do” or disciplines that would be required in college.
Some misconceptions about AP participation by Group 1 participants included thinking more students participated in advanced academics classes than actually did and that the economic status of the students in a school impacted why students participated in AP. For example, Renae thought that everyone took AP. Renae also believed that only high performing districts created an environment where a student must be in AP classes to be a part of the top 10 percent, a goal for Texas high school students because of a state policy granting automatic public university admissions to the top 8-10 percent of each school’s graduating class. Renae’s misconception was that this condition was true for only elite high schools.

Although students believed they were prepared, they still feared failure at the university level. Renae worried about being able to continue to embrace academically rigorous courses and opportunities while in college and feared dropping out. LaTisha shared these fears but pledged, “If that happens, then I just go back to college. Like I never thought about NOT going to college.” All members of Group 1 talked about earning college credit as a result of their AP classes and exam experiences.

Groups 1 and 2 agreed about the preparation provided by AP courses, but Group 2 discussed also preparation for high school AP courses. Aubrey focused on how participating in Pre-AP had helped her know somewhat what she would face in an AP course. Her Pre-AP teachers had told her, “You can do it, like you know, don’t doubt yourself!” so she took the risk and tried AP. What AP courses offered to students was viewed by the Group 2 students as financial preparation for college, preparation for college completion, and successful navigation of career and adult life.

Despite the varied experiences of the Group 2 students with AP courses, they all understood that the courses had the potential to help with college costs. They intended to take as
many AP courses as possible, saving time and money associated with future college tuition. Shonda mentioned also scholarships and work study as options for helping finance a college education for herself and her friend. Partially because of the help of her church family, Aubrey had thought about finances in her college plan. She admitted that she “won’t probably graduate school like debt free, but I don’t want to have, just be in all this debt to where I can’t even function in life or when I’m married.” She listed student loans, scholarships, and people with resources for helping to finance her education.

Students in Groups 1 and 2 intended to go to college and perceived AP courses as helping them experience what college courses will be like. Shonda planned to be a doctor or an engineer and believed that her problem-solving abilities were improved by AP classes. She noted, “At this school, they encourage all students to take an AP course, and they even pay for the students to take the AP test so that’s a plus. Overall, they just want more students to strive to… go to college.” Aubrey discussed the various ways that AP classes supported students in college including independence in decision-making. Michael was not sure how AP courses would help him in college except possibly providing “opportunities for what I want to major in.” Michael was the exception in the group as to awareness of benefits often touted as associated with AP. He seemed to have fallen into AP almost by accident, and he was not sure what the benefit might be. Because of the training that AP courses provided for her, Aubrey felt more prepared to manage college in the fall and wanted to be an example for younger students who might think “if she can do it, or the seniors can do it, then like I can do it.”

Aubrey most concretely discussed the importance of the AP course as training for life. Prioritizing, balancing responsibilities with personal time, and taking care of family obligations were important for success in advanced academics and life. In all of her interviews, Aubrey
reiterated the idea of preparedness for life. She talked about how her high school AP experiences would help her in the future, including how to handle her new level of independence. The thinking she practiced in her rigorous courses would help her in her adult world. She noted, 

Even if I had like a job...you have to balance stuff with your working at a job with other people when the teacher, the boss, tells you to do something, and you have to do it....But because I took that AP class, Ms._____ gives me tasks all the time. Let me get these into your hands right here. Like five papers at a time. It prepares you.

The participants in Group 3 provided varying degrees of specificity about their future plans and the possible impact of their high school choices. The two sophomore students discussed taking AP classes next year. Both were somewhat new to the school and expressed a wish, with their parents’ support, to make sure they would be successful in the new environment before attempting a new challenge. Deborah hoped to “learn better” and “have more knowledge in what I’m taking” because of her planned AP experience. The future careers Group 3 discussed included being a lawyer, nurse, psychologist or pilot and a physician’s assistant. However, at the time of the interviews, none of the students had taken any advanced academics courses, nor did they seem to recognize the relevance of math and science to some of their career choices. In fact, all four participants reported having struggled with math classes in although Charles seemed to interpret his struggle as temporary because of changing schools and a difference in standards.

None of the Group 3 students could articulate the pathways in high school or college that would help them realize their chosen careers. Destini talked about a pre-law program at a local community college but did not know about the bachelor’s and law degrees required to practice law. Malik shared that school personnel seldom directly presented information about career pathways as related to courses chosen in high school. Counselors shared some information as
part of the schedule selection process each spring, but these short counseling sessions were the only times counselors discussed the connection between high school courses and career pathways with students. Teachers provided the little guidance received informally through their daily access to students. AP students appeared to have a clearer understanding than Group 3 of the connection between high school course selection and college readiness, but they reported similar experiences with counselors.

Destini’s future goals included becoming independent as well as earning a college degree. She noted that “knowing how to read and knowing how to count my own money” could help her obtain a job, attend college, and have her own home. Part of her plan was waiting until the age of 25 to marry and have children. Charles understood AP courses as giving him an advantage for his future and seemed to link advanced courses directly to gaining admittance into a “better college” that would lead to a “better career” and to learning to be a responsible adult. He had researched one college that has a psychology program but is unsure about flight schools, and he understood that selective colleges like Yale or Harvard require rigorous courses.

Influence of Community

While all study participants had some interactions with their community, the definition and influence of the community on participants varied. Shonda and Malik had only school interactions, for example. Since no common pattern emerged from the data, only two stories are shared.

Leonard discussed vulnerability and trust within the community. He said, “I’m like squishy on the outside, but inside that rock hard core. So it’s like, ‘Yeah, I’ll let you in, but if you start jeopardizing, I will show you that I can push you back.’” He reported having been at odds with his long-time church community. He perceived that because his family consisted of
accomplished “movers and shakers,” the church community did not like them. Leonard provided
an example of not being fully recognized for his numerous accomplishments in a public church
ceremony and attributed this slight to the church community’s not fully appreciating his
academic accomplishments. When asked what the community thought about advanced courses,
each student noted that a general appreciation for the opportunity existed, but most community
members did not know specific information about AP, GT, or Pre-AP courses. Leonard shared
that “they know enough to recognize that it’s quality, [and]… they think very highly of the
program and the courses.”

Aubrey was involved in her school and church community in several ways. Her school
commitments centered on drill team, specifically as an officer her senior year. She was also
involved in Fellowship of Christian Athletes, student council, National Honor Society, and choir.
Aubrey’s other life-long commitment centered on her church community which included being
in the choir, sacred dance, mime, and working in the nursery. She participated in community
service like prayer and food support, the mobile feeding program, and working in the church
office as a volunteer. She said, “I am very, very, very church oriented. Over time, I mean, it’s
been because of my parents, but now I am kind of finding my way.” In finding her way, Aubrey
had introduced several of her school friends to her church community and talked about the
positive experience for both her and her peers. Aubrey perceived her relationship with her peers
in this setting as one of leadership and being a good role model.

And for me it was like life-changing. I feel like I’m different because of that conference.
Like we, like in prayer….I’m kinda like trying to tune everybody out, and when they see
me do [it], they are like, “Okay, she’s doing it. I can do it. I don’t know anybody that
Aubrey admitted that she wanted to have a positive influence on her peers who knew she would make appropriate decisions. Because educators made up a large part of her church family, she felt amply supported in preparing for college, including offers to help with essays, money, and daily reminders to “do great things.” She heard them say, “You won’t fail” and was rewarded for good grades and good citizenship. She perceived that even church members who did not make the right choices in their youths encouraged today’s youth. She reported that they said, “Yes, school is great. Continue to do great things. Don’t be like me.” Or, “You know, I did it. You can do it too.”

Influence of Peers

Peers had a significant impact on Group 1 as they tackled extracurricular activities and rigorous academic schedules. The relationships were overwhelmingly positive and afforded a support group for these four students, who also reported some negative peer interactions.

Group 1 participants had similar positive peer relationships. They maintained friendships with all kinds of people, but their daily peer groups consisted of advanced academic students because of proximity and similar experiences. Renae admitted, “I was friends with everyone, but it’s so hard to maintain a friendship with the others…I still interact with them. I still have lunch with kids who are in regulars.” However, the perception of others had an impact on the diversity of friendships. Leonard noted “The ones inside [GT/AP] think we are the most wonderful people on the planet, and the ones outside put us up on a pedestal which I consistently tell them not to do…[saying] ‘I know you are this smart.’” LaTisha began interacting only with GT and AP friends because they had more in common and worked together on their academic classes. “We
would have complex discussions and things, and we would help each other in our AP classes. I feel like I related more with them than I did with ‘regulars’ kids.” Franklin remembered that with his friends he would participate in small talk in elementary school, but not about academics. That non-academic conversation changed. “As we got into middle school or high school, I was always the go-to guy; I was always the guy that people would ask for help because I understood the material, and I did it in ample time.” Peer interactions appeared to become more specialized and solely inclusive of academic or extracurricular peers as the GT/AP students progressed through high school toward college.

The few negative peer experiences that Group 1 participants encountered centered on differences in future goals or how they treated others. Renae offered an example of assumptions her academic peers made about her relationship with other African American students in the school, assuming that she would go talk to a group of African American students in the cafeteria. However, Renae shared that the other African American students, “don’t like me because I guess I’m supposed to go talk to them [other African Americans] because we all look the same, but I don’t. And everyone makes a big issue about race, but I don’t.”

Leonard did not tolerate others being unkind and had stood up in situations where inappropriate behavior had occurred even with his closest friends, frequently reminding them that both committing and allowing an act of unkindness are unacceptable.

LaTisha reported negative reactions from peers who were not in advanced classes. They did not have common topics to talk about. “They are like, ‘Politics? I don’t care about politics; I don’t care about that stuff.’ I am like you should know. You should care about the government.” The impression that her friends had about her intellectual peers was not complimentary, reflecting that students in AP and GT were “snooty and bougie [Bourgeoisie].” Franklin also
experienced discord with peers who did not focus on school like he did. He continued to choose to be serious and focus on school, even if he distanced himself from peers who did not agree with his approach to academics and his future.

They say, “Hey, man, let me copy from you.” Well, I don’t feel like it’s right to take what I did and get the same grade I got….It’s not fair to people to get away with that kind of stuff….That’s why some relationships are good, but mostly I keep a casual relationship with most students that I have in my classroom.

Group 2 data regarding peer relationships emerged as mostly positive, but differed for each individual. These students did not discuss peer relationships in a negative way. Shonda did not have many friends at this school at the time of her interviews. Aubrey had peers in all parts of her high school and church communities. Michael interacted only with fellow AP or band students. Raymond had friends from several different groups including his AP friends and his athlete friends, which he thought showed he could get along with all types of people. Because of their approaches and circumstances, these students had varying amounts of information to share. With the widest circle of friends and being furthest along in her high school career, Aubrey had the most to say about her peers.

Unlike the others in Group 2, Aubrey had support from students who were older than she was. She said,

I keep on taking these hard classes, and now that I’ve thought about it, I have lots of supporting people. I know I talked to a friend who graduated last year and is now in college, and it’s like “because I [older student] took the AP class, now it’s a little bit easier. It’s still kinda new concepts, but I understand a little better because I was in that [AP] class.
Aubrey perceived that the conversations she had with older students in high school guided her to take a risk in taking a challenging class, and she wanted to repay the favor by being a mentor. Students two years her senior convinced her that, “maybe I can do that too.” These older students were very smart and encouraged her, and she wanted to do the same for her younger friends. She told them repeatedly, “Take AP classes. They really are good.” However, Aubrey cautioned other students not to get involved if they do not want to work, and part of her influence on peers was her modeling of how to maneuver challenging classes successfully. Some typical self-reported dialogue between herself and peers included Aubrey’s friends marveling that she was doing her work, attending tutoring, and going to talk to a teacher.

Aubrey reported positive peer experiences void of bullying or “major issues that I couldn’t handle,” and she guided and encouraged underclassmen as they tried more challenging courses. Her varied friend and peer base seemed very important to her. “I’m not very set on being friends based on the classes that we take so I have a lot of friends who are in regulars class or honors classes or even the lower classes so it [the academic program] doesn’t really matter.” Raymond expressed a similar message; many types of students were his friends.

For Shonda and Michael, the peers in AP courses became friends as they had similar ideas about the advantages of AP courses, future plans, and the ability to lean on each other for support. Their peers thought taking AP and the associated exams was wise. For Michael, music and participation in the band helped his relationships with peers “because middle school was where I learned music. Music was where it helped me a lot…I met my first friend on the first day there.” Like Aubrey, Michael often helped his peers, and in the AP classes, he found additional friends. “People will sometimes come to me for help if they are having trouble understanding something, or I come to them if I don’t understand something.” That camaraderie with AP peers
was a factor in Michael’s taking challenging courses that provided a safe place, as Michael seemed to struggle with interacting with peers and sustaining friendships. When he told his story about peers, he discussed meeting friends and then somehow growing apart because of changing schools. He then mentioned bullying and people changing as you grow up. “But when I changed schools, I just ended up not knowing anybody. And you know bullies can get to people when you don’t know anybody. Then every time I would switch schools, I was back to square one.” He added that when you see them [former friends] again, “they are not like they used to be…. You always think they are your friend, and then they turn their back with somebody else or something else,” leaving you alone.

Influence of Family

Group 1 described both positive support and negative interactions with family. Group 2 reported only positive family interactions, and like Group 1, they talked about these interactions in terms of support of a home and extended family environment conducive to success. What was peculiar to Group 2 was a discussion of the influence of specific guidelines set by the family. The influence of family emerged as a theme of both emotional and practical impact for all three groups.

All twelve participants perceived that family members supported their academic success. Support included an expectation to attend college, encouragement to take and remain in challenging courses even when they seemed overwhelming, and showing pride in the accomplishments of their children. Immediate and extended family members monitored grades and encouraged students to continue to strive for growth. Renae readily acknowledged the support of her mom and extended family, saying, “My mom has always been like she wants me to go as far as I can in education because she knows I am really into learning and stuff so. My
mom has always said, “You are going to college,” like I said I wasn’t!” She mentioned that her maternal grandparents were supportive, and her grandmother had been in the honors classes. As reported by Renae, her dad was supportive but in a more confusing way. “He’s the one who wants me to go the historically black college… Then he doesn’t because it holds me back and keeps me in the black world or something…I pretty much have support with some confusion.”

Leonard celebrated that, “My family loves the fact that I am in these courses,” and LaTisha noted that her mother constantly asked about her school work and future plans. In particular, her mother understood the nature of the coursework in advanced classes. When LaTisha responded that she did not have homework due the next day, her mother said, “‘You know what I mean. Do you have stuff that’s eventually due or that you can be working on?’ Like she knows with AP courses I’m gonna have to have homework or something to do practically every night” and should always be working on some assignment for future deadlines. Her family played an impactful role in taking AP courses. Her mother required her to take advanced classes, and LaTisha grew to appreciate that guidance, eventually thanking her mom for the encouragement to prepare for college which prepares you for life. Franklin also discussed how his mother regularly monitored and interacted with him regarding school achievement. His family expressed their pride in his accomplishments, and he recognized the value of that feedback, support, and monitoring of grades.

Group 2 students reported similar support. Shonda's and Michael’s homes were central family gathering places. Aubrey had a close relationship with her maternal aunt who was, “like my mom; she constantly tells me that she almost birthed me…I am very close with my cousins and my aunt.” Group 2 had involved families to varying degrees. All had a family member who either took them to school in the morning, picked them up, or both. Students noted family
support that included providing a home environment conducive to success, support from extended family, and setting guidelines for behavior, grades, and goals for the future.

The main difference between Group 1 and Group 2 data regarding family interactions concerned extended family members. Group 1 participants had extended family members who wanted to give input on college choice and cousins and other family members who were not as successful as they had been.

Renae had an uncle who was cynical about education, seeing it as a waste of time. He had gone to college himself, but he believed neither college nor AP classes were needed. Renae shared that she realized at a certain point that her dad was prejudiced toward anyone who was not African American. She recalled, “My dad went to a black college. He’s like all pro, ‘Yeah, black people are the best. Men are the best, but women are smarter, but men are better physically. You have to submit.’ He’s like really old fashioned.” A different kind of disconnect occurred between Leonard and three older athlete cousins whose reason for not participating in AP was “no pass no play,” the state policy that athletes could only participate in extracurricular activities if they maintained a passing average. He noted, “I feel that they could have definitely handled both if they sought to apply themselves. But they also did not have the most supportive parent team.” Other members of his family who did not value AP courses felt other proficiencies were more important. Leonard recounted,

They think you can have all of the book smarts in the world, and you are not going to go anywhere unless you have street smarts….Since I was 12 years old, I have been able to catch public transportation by myself and go basically any where I want.
Leonard appeared frustrated that some family members did not recognize that he exhibited both academic and street smarts. Basically, the straightforward advice and support for Leonard from his family was “Make A’s. Make a living. Don’t screw it up.”

Aubrey shared that teacher support had an impact on her mother’s encouraging her to take advanced classes. “If she [mother] knows that teachers think I can do it, then she’s like, ‘Well, they’re with you every day…They know what you’re doing so if they say you can do it, then you can do it.’” Aubrey’s strong family relationships played a substantial role in her success. “Um, I have a pretty good relationship with my family [and] usually close friends, considered family, and I’m very close with my mom. I have two brothers. I am very close with them. I am not very close with my dad. My parents are divorced.” Her mom was supportive of her educational goals.

My mom, she’s very, she didn’t go far in her education so she’s very like, “Go to school, get a great education, don’t miss classes, you’re not going to fail.”…She’s kinda like my main person, my mom is, and my aunt. They both think it’s really good, and I’m setting a good example for my brothers and my younger cousins and some of my friends that I go to church with because, you know, they think like, “Oh, she’s doing AP classes. Maybe I need to do it too.

Balance was a part of Aubrey’s plan. She planned to balance her financial earning and spending, just as she balanced her time in high school. Sometimes the balancing did not work as planned and caused friction with her mother as in an example where Aubrey skipped church because of staying up too late studying on a Saturday night.

Aubrey talked about her church family’s being a part of her academic support system.
Our pastor, she’s kinda like my mimi, kinda like grandma and so she’s great. She’s kinda always, always, always telling me just giving me like words of advice. Throwing scriptures at me. …“Okay, you know what the Bible says about this. Have faith and be of good courage” and blah, blah, blah, blah. Because she knows it gets hard.

Family guidelines and expectations, peculiar to Group 2 data, were the source of balance for all Group 2 students. In addition to earning good grades, parents expected other commitments to be honored. Student perceived that their parents expected academic success without sacrificing other responsibilities at home or in the community, such as church attendance and chores at home. An example of parents setting guidelines was when Raymond had to work on his grades instead of playing on the school basketball team his junior year.

Aubrey’s mother exemplified parents setting the parameters and letting the child figure out how to complete everything that was required of her at home and at school. Learning to prioritize was “something that I had to come up with on my own.” Aubrey had to ask “which one is more important?” Michael’s mother modeled clear guidelines that were indicators of academic success. She had finished college later in life after initially attending for four years after high school, so she was very persistent about Michael’s taking an SAT test early so he could be knowledgeable about his college choices. He perceived that his family supported his taking AP classes in high school and told him, “Just don’t fail…Your average has to be higher than an eighty-five, and that’s my expectation for you. I don’t care what you take as long as you have good grades and get into a good college.” Michael did not perceive his family’s support was positive. They gave him parameters such as “Pass or you’re grounded.” He admitted, “My parents, they weren’t strict….They always had a mindset that I was just going to go to college.
Be smart. Have a great job. Be an average American.” While he described his family as dysfunctional, Michael’s was the only family not led by divorced parents.

Despite seeming not to enjoy the chaos of a house full of family, Michael acknowledged liking the involvement of extended family members in his life. The advice they gave included working on your grades and if you did, “How easy it will be in the long run. Don’t give up. Please don’t drop out. And save money.” Plus, his dad shut off the power if Michael was up late watching Netflix movies. Michael understood the parameters his family set for his performance, and he attempted to adhere to them.

The students in Group 3 repeatedly discussed their closeness with family members. These ties to both immediate and extended family might be associated with their reported lack of relationships with community. Their family and school friends were their communities. Destini explained, “I’m really close with family. I really wasn’t an outside kid, you know, because it was too much trouble so technically I come home from school, do my homework, and watch TV. I really never went outside when I was young.” Destini saw her inclination to stay at home as longstanding. She said, “I just really liked hanging with family, you know, cuz anything can happen like…friends, they can get you in trouble, but with your family, you’ll be alright.”

Her extended family included many aunts and uncles in addition to her mom, dad, and grandmother. She spent her time taking care of the home, watching TV or listening to music or using her phone. When asked what her family thought of her choices in high school regarding courses, she noted her family was proud of her.

They [‘re] really happy for me. Once they knew that, once they found out that I passed my test [End of Course test required for graduation], they knew that I was going to graduate for sure. They [were] happy. Um, my mom, tears came out because, um, I’m the
one who broke the cycle. To know that my mom got pregnant at a young age and didn’t graduate. And my aunties didn’t graduate. But I don’t have any kids, and I’ve never been pregnant, well not until I’m married, and I’m going to graduate this year. So, they’re very proud of me.

She was proud of her efforts as well, - as she had not passed one of her required exams that allowed her to graduate until the spring. Her family supported her when they said, “‘Keep pushing through. You’re gonna go to college so you can become a lawyer.’ And they[‘re] always telling me ‘You better get married before you have any kids.’” Their support seemed to be manifested in encouragement to do better than they had with school and life choices.

Charles described a similar process and interaction with his family. His older sisters took AP courses so they had paved the way for his participation. Charles’s family talked to him weekly about his progress in school and his future plans. Deborah’s extended family was very involved in her life until moving to ACISD. She shared yearly family reunions and connections with her extended family of cousin, and she helped take care of her younger brothers every day. Mom was the one who helped Deborah make her decisions about school courses and daily checked for homework completion and understanding. Her mom, who had not attended college, also periodically asked her about her future plans, college major and college choice.

Malik, Deborah, and Charles had a limited amount of family locally. Malik really had only his mother for local support, and Charles said he saw extended family, like grandmothers, aunts, and uncles, maybe once a year because they did not live in the area. Consequently, he really only had his immediate family to interact with him regarding school. A discussion about grades centered on geometry and chemistry classes because math and science were really important core classes according to his family. One way that this family’s discussion differed
from the dialogues of other families was the emphasis on grade analysis such as: “Why are you not doing well? Why are your grades lower this week? What caused the impact?”

Influence of School Personnel

The importance of teachers and counselors to the process of becoming college ready was acknowledged by all 12 students. They discussed how teachers made students feel about themselves and their academic work was a motivating factor for them. The relationships with teachers and the teachers’ efforts to make the classes motivating and engaging were noted several times. Participants felt that counselors needed to contribute more to the success of the students.

Renae shared that her impression of the educational system stemmed from the attitudes of adults. “That’s what I remember. The way people treat me; that’s what I remember about education.” She attributed readiness for college and academic challenges to the teachers who had guided her. “I feel like AP has prepared me somewhat. But it wasn’t the course [that prepared me], it was the teacher.” Leonard expressed that the pathway to success and a good relationship was being able to communicate with your teachers. Franklin added that student received an added support if they worked on the relationship. “You have to do what you have to do to get on the teacher’s good side…just asking a few questions or being nice to them….They’re people too.” In talking about the impact of one teacher in particular, LaTisha shared that he led the students to understand how adults work and what to do to get into college. “It’s not just scraping by.”

None of the participants in Group 2 mentioned negative relationships with teachers. Even the teachers who taught challenging courses where the students most struggled earned high praise from the students. Teachers were approachable for questions or tutoring. Although the
students interacted with counselors only for schedule changes, they reported they were helpful. Only Aubrey discussed being temporarily upset with a counselor who had incorrectly impacted her schedule. The counselor rectified the error, and they maintained a positive relationship.

Group 2 had two sub-themes that others did not.

All participants in Group 2 credited teachers or counselors with initiating their journey in Pre-AP or AP classes. They perceived the school staff as encouraging students to take the risk of selecting more challenging courses, supporting them to persevere when the challenge seemed overwhelming, and helping them understand the value of the resources available to them in an AP program. The teachers validated the students’ efforts and cheered on their progress daily.

Aubrey acknowledged that teachers were the determining factor in her being introduced to Pre-AP and AP. She began to believe in her capabilities after she was successfully taking more challenging courses. She shared the dialogue of encouragement.

Because I was already in the honors classes, my teachers would have a lot of faith. And I don’t usually have a lot of faith in myself. So I feel like, “I can’t do that.” Like I’m not going to. But they were like, “No, based on what you did this school year, your grades were good.” (Three of my grades were not good)”You are a good worker, a hard worker. Even if you don’t pass this test, I know that you studied for it. You come back. You come to tutoring.” …That’s kinda how that went.

Michael gave credit to both teachers and counselors for signing him up for Pre-AP and AP courses, noting they were very persistent about it because, “Last year during my AP [Pre-AP] World History, I think she recommended me to take AP Seminar this year which is because I had constant A’s in that class…Just anywhere in the 90s.”
Group 2 students perceived that they were successful in AP courses because they received regular encouragement to persevere when challenged. Some instances included inducement to remain in the AP classes, while other teachers advised how to successfully navigate rigorous material. Aubrey’s experience included the encouraging approaches of three different teachers. One teacher encouraged her to remain in an AP math class even though she was struggling with the content and not happy with her current grade. She recounted that she always struggled in math but was encouraged year after year by her math teachers to continue with rigorous math classes. Her current math teacher gave her reasons she should continue even when she was not feeling successful on two separate occasions.

He was just like ‘If that’s what you really want to do [drop the AP course], then let me know, but I mean you really have come a long way.’ So I was just like thinking, “Oh my goodness, if he thinks I can do it, then I’ll stay. So that was the first six weeks…. [Months later] “We’re about to be in the second semester, and you want to quit?” ah, so like I don’t know what I’m going to do….It has everything to do with the material and learning.

The details that Aubrey shared in this story underscored the memorable qualities of the human connection between student and teachers. Teachers in other classes also encouraged Aubrey to persevere. Aubrey concluded, “The teachers basically, you know, if they thought I could do it, I guess….you know what you [teachers] are talking about.”

Aubrey recounted receiving repeated and constant messages from her AP teacher that she associated it with success. She shared that her mantra had become, “I can’t waste time because I remember what happened when I was in my history class and I didn’t get this turned in on time.” Aubrey stated that she recognized that her teachers would “push” and give her advice on how be
successful in their classes. All students in Group 2 reiterated the power of teacher encouragement to access and persevere in Pre-AP and AP courses.

Similarly, Group 3 consistently talked about the support of teachers in helping them complete their coursework successfully. Missing from every conversation for this group were instances of teachers requiring rigorous and advanced performance from the students. Teachers were presented as willing to help the struggling student, but there was no evidence of encouragement to tackle more demanding work. Still, Group 3 connected with teachers and counselors. Malik identified getting close to teachers as a deliberate strategy he employed for his success. He attempted to “show them that I am working hard….I come in to tutoring…because it shows them that you are really trying and that you want to graduate.” He mentioned working to connect with teachers on a personal level. “Sometimes we’ll like not talk about school. Or we talk about personal outside stuff like family, what we watched on TV last night, and stuff like that” but remained focused on school work obligations. While a personal connection was important, academic success was paramount. Mostly counselors were relegated in Group 3’s minds to scheduling and student initiated conversations about college.

Destini shared similar stories about her Spanish teacher. “[I] really like her. She’s really cool. She help us out with our work, um, well, we work as a group. She doesn’t mind.” Destini considered her peers as a part of the effective climate. “They[re] nice. They not…they don’t really talk about drama. We get our work done together.” The counselor, with whom Destini had worked all four years of high school, helped her with classes and passing state mandated tests and was her personal cheerleader. The best advice she ever received from her counselor was, “keep pushing and move forward,” and Destini believed her and did just that.
Charles’s relationship with counselors and teachers was also favorable but not on a personal level. They talk about grades, understanding assignments, and being proactive, noting, “It’s given me more insight on it. I know why that grade was the way it was.”

Barriers and Struggles

Group 1 students overtly discussed race as a type of struggle. Renae made 18 different comments that centered on the idea of racism or being treated differently because of race so this theme permeated her story. The other students commented on the impact of race on their experiences, but with a lesser frequency.

Often the only African American in her elementary GT classes, Renae recounted several incidences where people repeatedly expressed surprise that an African American was in a GT class. They exclaimed, “It’s so exciting to see a black girl that can do all of this with their brain,” you know like when they say, ‘You’re attractive for a black girl,’ but it’s different because, you know, it’s your brain.” Renae recounted an extreme example of the racism she encountered in another district.

It came to a head when we were going on a field trip to downtown, and they had a ‘Hi, my name is…’ badge. And I don’t know why I made a big deal about it because we were going in public. And I asked one of the teachers, one of the ones who used to make fun of me, “Can I just not wear this? I don’t want people to know my name where we are going.” I don’t know, it just seems weird to have strangers see me and call my name. The teacher said, “What do you want them to call you, little negro girl?” you know, and then I told my mom, and she went up there and went crazy, completely crazy… and then I left and went back to AC ISD. So that whole experience was disgusting. I hated it.
The experience had been a vivid part of Renae’s memory for ten years. She noted that ACISD was the only school district she attended where overt racism was not a constant focus but microaggressions (unintended discrimination), occasionally surfaced. Renae said, “They might say it’s really good that you’ve gotten this far considering your race, but they never called me the n word like that lady in the other place.”

These public school experiences in grades K-12 had impacted Renae’s decision-making processes regarding college choice as well. In discussing which institution to choose to attend next year, she had some conflicting pressure from her father, who had attended Texas Southern. He’s been trying to push me to go to a historically black school, but I am not comfortable going to a historically black college because [of] all the black people I know, I’m different. So if I went to a black college, I would feel weird. I would not like that. He’s always pushed me to go to college, but his kind of college.

The conflict for this Renae also extended to her place in the institution of higher learning as an African American. “I’m just like if I could get into an ivy league, I would want to go, but I don’t want to go if I’m just going to be a token.” Her experiences of people questioning or being surprised about a gifted African American in the K-12 system appeared to impact her version of her future choices and experiences.

Leonard directly addressed his African American community and its views on education. He summarized that college-educated African Americans know the value of an education. People at churches and in African American communities generally knew its value either directly or by reputation. Leonard shared an example of an exchange with African Americans on public transportation. An man approached him and said,
“You got your head in the book. You are the only boy, only person, only teenager I have ever seen on this train who had their textbook open, who is looking at it, who is reading in it. That’s good, man, keep your head in the books. Don’t wind up like me.”

Leonard continued the narrative in sharing an exchange with peers on the train.

And then you look at African American students who are my age who are basically going down the path that man went down, and they are kind of like “Look at him…” you know “expletive over here reading this book” and it’s kind of like “whatever, whatever, I am going to read my book and ignore you because ain’t nobody got time for that.” And just move on.

Leonard’s attitude about not being negatively affected by the attitudes of others was not innate. He had weathered experiences that resulted in this resilience to confrontation about education for African Americans. Family support sculpted that evolution. He noted,

Definitely when I was a lot younger, it was harder for me because there was a very much…uh…what do they say “acting white” or doing things like this and that and stuff like that…I’m black, obviously, look at my skin… I don’t understand how that is acting white….That’s why I was feeling like when I was younger, I was like, “Mama, everyone is mean to me. No one likes me because they say I talk like a white person”… and Mama was like, “So, why do you care? [laughs] Why is it important?” You know, Mama is like, “It’s okay, baby, ignore it. It’s not going to matter.” You are just like, “How can you say that? It matters so much.” And then definitely through high school, definitely after [leadership camp he attended], I would say I am definitely a lot more comfortable with it.

LaTisha and Franklin discussed the effects of racism in much more nebulous terms that validated the impact of race on their experience, yet they seemed less able to bring up its impact
directly. LaTisha’s perceptions seemed to be that participation had to do more with economics than race. The observations made by Franklin included the impact on African American families of absent fathers.

And I feel like this happens a lot with African or Black and African American families where the dad and the mom, they have a child and something happens very early at birth and the child never even knew that they had a father. I think that’s very, uh, very unfortunate that it happens to a majority of the African American populace. It’s very unfair to the child that they have to go through something like that.

In this group, students demonstrated varying degrees of comfort in talking about race as associated with their GT and AP school experience. Some students talked about it openly immediately, and others grew to be comfortable enough to mention the topic but seemed careful about what they shared.

Group 2 identified three kinds of barriers to academic success, barriers associated with lack of preparation for rigorous coursework, individual situations, and those associated with race. Like Renae, Group 2 students noticed that they were often the only African American students in their AP classes. Shonda discussed her observation that African American students might try a Pre-AP class but not continue on to the AP classes. “Well, in the two AP classes I’ve taken, I’m not really seeing a lot of African Americans taking the course, but Pre-AP, there’s a lot of kids taking it. They don’t seem to take that extra step into AP courses for some reason.” Aubrey, on the other hand, had a theory about why African American students did not take AP at the same rate as they took Pre-AP classes, even though they showed some curiosity about what goes on in those higher level classes. They thought the work was too challenging. Aubrey reflected that
many of her Pre-AP classmates “did not go to AP class. But we still talk; they ask me like, “What are you doing in there? Ooooh, we’re not doing that. That’s too hard.”

Unique data shared by each student in Group 2 indicated that they were unprepared for AP courses by their involvement with Pre-AP. One outcome of lack of preparation was delineated when Aubrey shared her decision-making process in leaving her AP World History class, exemplifying students’ struggles with transitions to more rigorous courses. Aubrey recounted that she survived the first four weeks in her first AP class, AP World History, and then withdrew from this class which had presented her with unfamiliar material at a level of difficulty and pace that she had not previously experienced. Aubrey successfully took AP U.S. History the following year with more confidence. In retrospect she believed, “When I went into last year, the 11th grade, I think I was more prepared, and I was like, “Okay, I think I can do this now,” knowing what to expect.

Possibly because of this experience, Aubrey shared that “in general we [African Americans] need to be like pushed a little bit more. Because of whatever reasons, what we’ve been going through as far as African Americans, we need to be told we can do it.” She recounts that when a student or teacher

puts you down, your confidence, it’s gone. Even though it was just one person, that’s a big deal….I had to believe in myself first of all, but by the teachers I was pushed a little bit more. And I kind of felt like oh, they believe in me, so I better believe in myself for real, and I’m going to go like further. That’s what needs to happen.

For some students, the challenge was the kind of reading and amount of reading required. Aubrey and Shonda discussed the challenges of reading a college-level textbook. Students were
often not prepared to work in a topic that might not interest them without guidance, justification for the choice, or background knowledge.

Group 2 students found that when they had the appropriate preparation in a Pre-AP classroom, the transition to AP worked more smoothly. However, even the best Pre-AP class was not the same as an AP class. When the student entered the AP classroom with some advanced academics experience, a work ethic, and a willingness to learn, he or she perceived that success was more likely. Aubrey recalled,

Like if I told somebody [teacher’s name]’s class is hard. You have to really study. When you get in there the first day, he tells you. “Alright; we’re going to go through all these chapters, AP test this day, you know, all of you are going to be doing this with the note cards.” You’re like, “Okay; I’m kinda already prepared for this so it’s not that bad.”

Aubrey perceived that the academic push needed to occur before an AP class so she could be ready. If she had experienced a more rigorous level of course in her freshman year, Aubrey’s AP World History experience might have been different. When she took the AP US History class, she used positive self talk to persevere. Each Group 2 student told a story similar to Aubrey’s about the transitional struggles when moving from Pre-AP to AP courses. They all had discovered a pathway to success. Shonda learned how to read challenging texts; Aubrey worked on the protocols of a rigorous class until she was ready for AP U.S. History. Michael used tutoring and peers for support, and Raymond relied on his friends and tutoring to navigate the challenges he experienced his junior year.

Students in Group 2 all shared some type of situational barrier that had impacted them or their peers when choosing rigorous coursework for high school schedules. Their experience reflected varying degrees of college knowledge, including how to pay for college or how to
maneuver the college system. Shonda opined that some students might think they could not afford college or were not intelligent enough to attend college so they questioned taking a college class in high school. They did not think they could go to college, so why prepare “if I’m not going to be able to finish the entire thing?”

Michael perceived challenges that included being too young to understand the ramifications of choices that impacted the future and not being able to find the support he needed. “One part is we’re kids. We’re lazy. One part is I really don’t know what’s going on. Another part is teachers won’t help you.” And when he tried to help himself, he was not always successful “Usually when I struggle with a certain subject, I try to find a way to solve it online, but usually that won’t work because it will just show a different method that I’m not used to.” He considered the AP classes more challenging but not overwhelming.

Some of the struggles of the Group 2 students involved individual challenges with the environment. Michael’s earliest memory was how loud his Pre-K [private] school was, and how, as a junior, he still wished schools “would just be more quiet… It’s like they’re setting off something in my head….I was always a quiet kid.” Of the eight AP students in the study, Michael understood the least about AP classes. He seemed to have fallen into his two AP classes without fully understanding the resource that an AP class could provide for his future. He said, “I wouldn’t say that I understand AP courses. It’s just that it’s there.” Lack of understanding of the AP program and its purposes was a barrier; an additional barrier was Michael’s lack of skills to access the resources available.

Barriers included study hurdles in the home. Finding a time and place to study could be a challenge. In addition to balancing several subjects and some entertainment, Aubrey needed to fit the school work into her busy home and church life. She managed to work around the
distractions with her brothers. Michael considered one situational barrier to be moving around. He stated, “I never really had a school experience because I always was constantly moving schools every few years.” Though it appeared that he had always lived in the city of ACISD, this perception of always moving and not being connected to his school may have impacted his ability to utilize school resources to support his academic choices. Students discussed situational barriers they encountered, but few noted how race impacted their inclusion and success in academically challenging course. When prompted, they did discuss the lack of participation of African American students in AP.

Group 2 students made observations about few African Americans participating in AP, but not all thought race was a factor in the choices of students. Michael did not associate race with any type of barrier, stating, “I think that the fact that I’m an African American doesn’t really affect my responses. I’m pretty sure these are just simple questions from a person. It doesn’t really matter what the race is. You can interview a different person with a different race, and it can be the exact same answer as mine.” When asked why African Americans might not want to participate in AP, Michael said, “Maybe because they don’t want to take a challenge and think it would be a waste of time.”

Aubrey, on the other hand, believed that race was a factor in participation in advanced academics. She perceived that had barriers that resulted because of African Americans not being as educated as they might be.

I don’t know how to say it. Black people aren’t as educated as others. That’s how I feel. It’s true-ish. Some of them are super smart….African Americans, you know, we struggle with a lot of things. We’re looked down upon by the community because of several different reasons because of what happened back 10,000 years whatever. And so that
kind of plays a role with us now, and so it’s easier to put a Caucasian or…[student name] she’s Indian. She’s super-duper smart. It’s easy to put them in the [AP] class, but I feel like some of us feel, like, left out.

In specific reference to African American learners, Aubrey reiterated that students often did not think they belonged in an advanced academics class. African American students “mainly aren’t even in honors classes….I’m like, ‘Take AP classes!’ and they are like no, ‘I’m in regulars, of course not.’… It’s kind of intimidating because we specifically don’t want to take the challenge versus a Caucasian or a Hispanic.” This example underscored the perception that African American students might not believe they belonged in an AP class.

A new theme that resounded with Group 3 more strongly than with the other groups was struggle. The struggle these students talked about entailed the consequences of not meeting the minimum expectations for the general education curriculum, not the struggle associated with academic rigor. This struggle impacted their self-esteem and their sense of self-worth regarding education. Three of the four students in Group 3 discussed their struggles with math in particular.

Deborah remembered struggling with math in fifth grade and possibly having to repeat the school year. She credited her counselor with looking back to previous grades, and she “moved me up,” but in tenth grade she perceived her math abilities were weak, saying “I always struggled with math.” That one incident still impacted this student’s self concept of her math ability, and “it made me feel like I was going to be left behind or deprived because I really had a hard time understanding.” In later years Deborah better understood math and thought it was more accessible because it was hands-on.

Malik identified his academic struggle beginning in middle school, “where most of our work begins…it was still fun and play at times, but I had to really sit down and do my work like
my algebra, my reading and my writing classes.” Malik also mentioned a lack of skill in math, noting, “I’m not that good at math. That’s pretty much my weakest link…when I see math, I freak out because there’s a lot of steps to it.” He credited his current Algebra 2 teacher with helping him through this weakness. Destini also had a version of being a fifth grader and struggling with math. She shared that her teacher required her to stay after school to learn how to multiply and divide and assured her that she would make sure Destini had a ride home. She remembered that “I really didn’t want to stay after school like I did. As I grew up, I was like I was really thankful for that. Yeah. I went back and told her cuz we still lived in that area.”

Charles discussed taking the risk of more challenging work as he entered high school. He used the standard supports of teacher and peer tutorials and admitted that if he were taking an advanced academics class and was not doing well, he would work hard for a few weeks. Then, “if it still doesn’t look good, I would just hurry up and get out of the class before it’s too late.” He assured the researcher that he would try another AP class because “you can’t base it on one class or one experience. That was probably just an isolated incident.”

Program Misunderstandings and Unanswered Questions

Group 1 did not have any data for this theme. Since the students in Group 2 were participating in AP, they possessed some knowledge about the AP program and varying levels of knowledge about GT. Shonda was attending ACISD schools for the first year at the time of the interviews, and she had very little feedback on the district’s GT program. Aubrey wanted to know why students took a test to qualify for GT services. She thought grades should indicate ability to perform in the GT classes, and students should be allowed to try the more challenging courses and then get out if they could not perform. What she was describing was actually the district approach to Pre-AP and AP opportunity. Unless the participating students were a part of
the GT program, neither they nor their families appeared to understand why the two programs existed, how they differed, and how students were selected for each. Aubrey described the democratization of a GT program and seemed to think GT was a privilege instead of an educational mandate. When talking about the GT program, she described the district approach for Pre-AP class inclusion. Feeling “bad” about not being included in the GT program was a stark memory for Aubrey, underscoring her perception that being in GT was a judgment about the ability of the student rather than a mandate for teachers to teach so the students could maximize their learning.

Aubrey mentioned the two situations in which not being good test-takers and lacking motivation and preparation were barriers for future academic success of students. She perceived that in middle school she had been knocking on the door of academic opportunity and no one answered. For some of her peers, she perceived that poor test takers might be making good grades, but they could never shake feelings of inadequacy regarding tests and would never be considered for GT programs. Aubrey noted that she desired inclusion in the seemingly mysterious and unattainable GT classes when she asked the following:

How do I get in it….How [does] the system works for that?...But if I’m understanding, and I do my work, and I’m always trying to do better, and I need something more challenging, and I’m asking for it, “Give it to me!”…It kinds of puts you down when you’re not in the GT class.

The fact that Aubrey perceived she should be in a GT program distinguished her from the other AP students in Group 2.

Michael appeared to have several unanswered questions regarding AP classes and material learned within them. He raised specific questions about math as a career and the content
of physics. He also asked general questions about the AP teachers’ teaching and grading styles and who was in these courses. Michael said he did not really know what he wanted to do in the future. He was going to college, but he did not know what he would study. He was only one of all student participants that had no idea which major he wanted to study or which career he would pursue.

None of the students in Group 3 brought up any references to race while discussing their school experiences. Even though the purpose of the study and the research questions were provided, the topic was not addressed despite the open-ended nature of the interview questions. When asked about the topic directly, only Charles in Group 3 commented that being an African American did not come into play when discussing education and course choices. He said, “I would say that African Americans are no different from any other race as far as education. We all have the same capabilities as long as we put our minds to it. Strive hard to achieve whatever we want to do in life.” When asked if the school system helped perpetuate inequity in advanced academics courses or was not aware of what contributed to the inequity, he said, “Maybe a stigma. Or the fear of being isolated, maybe the only African American kid in an AP class because maybe they feel like, you know, African American kids don’t take AP classes, which is not really true.”

Group 3 students believed that the district required a teacher signature for a student to participate in AP or Pre-AP courses in ACISD. Actually, the district practiced “Open Enrollment” which did not require approval if a student were willing and prepared for the challenge. The Group 3 students also said one must have “good grades” but did not define what that term meant. In AC ISD, the district did not, in fact, designate a minimum GPA for participation in AP or Pre-AP courses. Group 3 understood that the advanced academics courses
required and provided a higher level of learning and more of a challenge. They believed that AP students took notes and had a large amount of homework compared to their general education courses. Lastly, they understood that the students had to sign up. You would not be a part of an advanced academics class by accident. Enrollment occurred because someone shared information with students, they talked to their families, and they decided to take on the challenge.

The students had a variety of questions about advanced academics courses in ACISD. The wanted to know what the courses were about, what kind of work was studied and completed, and how detailed they were. They seemed concerned about whether the work was significantly harder and what kind of grading and teaching styles would be employed. Who taught the courses and who and how many took the courses were topics of interest to the students in Group 3. They wanted to know what kind of credit can be earned for these courses. A major concern seemed to be whether the advanced academics teachers were good teachers as far as explaining things helping the students know what they were talking about. These questions underscored what students needed to know to actively and accurately choose to participate in advanced academics courses.

Equally lacking in the description by the students not involved in advanced academics coursework was the intensity of concerns that AP students shared associated with GT, Pre-AP and AP classes. Participants of Group 1 and Group 2 discussed their fear of failure, stress, amount of work, and the impact on grades in a different way from Group 3. Group 3’s discussion of stress and work load was based on their perceptions of not being able to handle those perceived negative elements of advance academics courses. For example, they believed grades were important as entry criteria, but they did not seem to understand the impact on GPA
regarding weighted points and impact on final grades. These differences in understanding the place of grades indicated a lack of experience with more rigorous courses. Students in Group 3 measured success by passing a class or a state assessment. Students in Groups 1 and 2 measured success by doing well in advanced courses and on college tests such as SAT and AP. Also missing for Group 3 was any conversation about the positives associated with rigorous coursework such as a sense of caring, setting yourself apart from others, establishing a work ethic, learning how to maintain focus, and establishing a sense of self-efficacy. Group 3 did not talk about coursework in the language of it being a “barrier” to reaching some larger goal. They discussed struggles and working to overcome the struggles, but they did not talk about barriers. Identifying what stood in the way of their participation was not possible because they had not tried the courses that they avoided. Investigating why the term “barrier” was not a part of their experience might be an interesting extension of this study. Maybe they did not see themselves as missing an opportunity so they did not think someone or something was prohibiting them from accessing advanced coursework.

Parent Participants

One parent for each student agreed to and was invited multiple times to participate in a focus group regarding their child’s high school course choices. The researcher used e-mail, phone, and an electronic calendaring application to contact and schedule meetings with parents. Finding a common time to meet proved difficult. One focus group that included three of the 12 parents, two Group 1 parents and one Group 2 parent, met. Subsequent attempts to schedule multiple parents in a focus group setting failed as parents dropped out or asked to reschedule. This led to four one-on-one interviews being held with one Group 1 parent and three Group 3 parents.
Because the parent group represented families of students from all three student research groups, the findings for this group introduced a different set of themes. Many of their components and sub-themes were similar, yet they differed in perceived focus and importance from the themes identified for the students. Parents wanted the researcher to meet their children. Each wanted to share stories that said something special about their child, the academic decisions they made as a family, and how school personnel could support them in their journey. The themes as presented in the parent section of Chapter 4 are as follows:

1. Meet Our Children
2. Family Knowledge of School Programs
3. Families’ Making Academic Decisions in High School
4. Turing Challenges into Success
5. Barriers and Struggles
6. Parents Embrace Challenge as a Positive Force
7. Focus on the Future: College and Career

The data collected from families included a focus group, interviews, a questionnaire, and research memos. It was analyzed using the grounded theory approach using a philosophical lens of justice to uncover these themes. These seven themes will be presented in summary form.

Meet Our Children

Several of the parents talked about their children’s personalities and how their attributes influenced their educational experiences. Assertiveness was a characteristic that seemed to distinguish the advanced academic from the other students. Parents of Group 3 students, Deborah, Malik, and Michael, described their children as quiet and introverted but hard working. They did not seem to perceive this lack of assertiveness as a concern except when accessing
opportunities for their children. For example, Deborah’s mother described her daughter as shy but focused. However, mom noted that this shyness had drawbacks when self-advocacy was needed.

I do think that she could be a little bit more vocal as far as needing assistance from the teachers. But I think that she’ll take no for an answer. If she’s [teacher] like, “Oh, you should understand it,” she won’t ask again because she’s already asked several times and it’s like begging.

The fact that Michael was very quiet, respectful, and “doesn’t really talk to you unless you talk to him [because] he doesn’t want to be the center of attention” was perceived by his mother as having a possible impact on his ability to navigate advanced courses when he needed help.

By contrast, the parents of the GT students and one AP student described their children as outgoing and independent, and reported that these qualities supported their children’s academic success. Aubrey’s parent indicated that her daughter’s being able to interact easily with others fed her independence as a learner. The mother remembered,

In Pre-K you go and you are sitting in the class wanting them to go in. All the other kids are crying and going crazy—“Oh, I don’t want to leave”—she looked at me and her dad and said, “Bye!” And we were like, “Wait, we want to say goodbye.” So she’s always been very independent.

Similarly, LaTisha’s parent indicated that her daughter used her outgoing personality to constantly fuel her curiosity and independent scholastic explorations. The daughter was always “very precocious and inquisitive and wanted to know more….She would ask every single question until I was flat out of answers. She had always had…that independent streak.” From
the parents’ perspectives, this ability to ask questions and exercise self-advocacy seemed to
differentiate between students choosing advanced academics and those who did not.

Family Knowledge of School Programs

Parents had varying degrees of knowledge about GT, Pre-AP, and AP programs in
ACISD. Some parents, like Franklin’s mother, capitalized on every opportunity to garner
information, and others rarely visited the school but gathered information from other sources like
their child’s friends, for Aubrey’s mother. This section presents four sub-themes that emerged in
parents’ responses to questions about their knowledge of the programs.

Parents noted that the main differences between general education and advanced
academics included the kind of thinking that occurred, the depth of the discussions, the kinds of
behavior expected, the students who chose advanced classes, and student engagement. Franklin’s
mother applauded the early intervention of the GT program and that the learning in gifted
classrooms was not textbook-centered but included activities such as discussion and debate. Her
view of general education was a “pattern of learning” resulting in short-term results but her
gifted son remembered “things that they discussed in middle school” because it was more than
just reading and testing.

LaTisha’s parent described the learning environment in advanced academics as geared to
students who were ambitious and wanted to achieve. She noted that the distractions in general
education included not mastering standards, inappropriate behavior, and off-task students who
used class time for non-academic pursuits, resulting in underperformance for themselves and
others. A teacher herself, LaTisha’s mother could see these issues from a teacher’s perspective.
She also explained that, unlike some of her peers, her daughter had chosen AP over easy As.
Aubrey’s parent described the difference between general education and advanced academics as
making a boxed cake versus a homemade cake. In a general education, you combine cake mix, eggs, and milk, and bake it by following a few simple steps, but in an advanced class, you follow the more complex steps of assembling flour, eggs, sugar and all the other ingredients to create a different, detailed, richer experience. Michael’s parent recalled that her son had sought inclusion and “wanted to be a part of that program [Pre-AP] because he just felt that those kids…were special.” She added that the perceived smaller class size of the advanced classes would provide an opportunity for projects that could foster student interest more than simply reading the book and taking the test. Michael’s mother repeatedly used the word “engaged” to describe students in advanced classes and “engaging” with references to projects and other aspects of Pre-AP and AP classes.

As cited in the previous paragraph, information from parents about the differences between general education and advanced academics classes came mostly from parents of Pre-AP or AP students. However, the parents of general education students also contributed to this discussion. Deborah’s parent thought that in an AP class, the student was pushed hard to learn the material with little explanation, a potential barrier without requisite background knowledge. She perceived that the able students would already know some of the AP material, so the instructor would spend less time explaining it. Since Deborah was in high school, her mother thought her education should be geared toward that level. The parent of Charles, a Group 3 student considering enrollment in Pre-AP and AP, was more positive, perceiving advanced classes as curriculum where, “The ceiling is lifted. You can go as far as you need to…Each student is challenged…[and has] an opportunity to learn at your level.” Malik’s parent shared that AP students get more in depth information, but the general education class was basic and prepared the students for the state assessment. She admitted that, “The thing I kind of hate about
Texas is that everything is geared toward the test. I hate that. AP…get[s] into more depth.”

Malik’s mom was referring to the state STAAR test and acknowledging that one of the advantages of taking AP is the course did not limit students with the tested state standards.

In general, the interviewed family members understood that ACISD offered advanced academics classes and were familiar enough with the courses to know they were college-level and could help students prepare for life after high school. They supported children’s taking AP, Pre-AP, and GT courses if they were prepared and supported by their schools and families. Families had varied levels of understanding about advanced courses.

The questions parents asked indicated they were not informed about the details of the advanced programs. For example, when asked what they would like to know about GT, AP, or Pre-AP programs, parents usually honed in on just one aspect of one program or asked about GT, Pre-AP and AP as one entity. Aubrey’s parent seemed to confuse the GT program with the AP classes in which her daughter was enrolled in high school and thought her child had been in gifted and talented classes in elementary school, but her daughter reported no participation.

Parents whose children were enrolled in AP courses wanted research about the long-term outcomes of AP participation. Aubrey’s mother wanted to see statistics that supported claims of college preparation in AP classes. LaTisha’s parent wanted to know if students fared better with college admission if they had taken the AP courses and made lower grades as opposed to having taken less demanding classes and earned higher grades. She also requested some support with college applications, deadlines, and scholarships.

Michael’s and Deborah’s parents wanted to know the distinction among the advanced classes: GT, Pre-AP, and AP. Michael’s mother also wanted to know how students were selected for each program and what skills they had to show. The benefits or results of advanced
classes interested these parents. They asked how the GPA was calculated with weighted classes and its impact on transcripts and getting into college.

Deborah’s mother, who reported having taken AP courses in high school, wanted to know if AP had changed in the last 15-17 years. This same parent had a son who had been tested during the current school year for the ACISD gifted program, but she did not know much about the process, the results, or the possible next steps for her as a parent.

Charles’s father would have liked to see the actual syllabus for an AP class and the resources available for parents to support the children enrolled. He said he would welcome any resources and knowledge of tutoring opportunities, long-term effects, and anything else to support the child. This family knew about the AP classes, but they did not know which ones were available at their child’s school. Malik’s parent would have liked to look at the AP curriculum to evaluate its detail and whether it was college level or preparatory.

Most families agreed that clear descriptions and expectations of gifted and advanced academics program should be available to guide families and schools in decision-making. Understanding the child’s abilities in order to match them appropriately with courses appeared to be important to the parents.

In defining a good student and a bright student, families often described the work habits and abilities of the students. Effort was associated with being a good student, but being exceptional marked the bright student. Malik’s parent described a good student as one who “at least tries. That’s motivated” while LaTisha’s and Franklin’s parents thought a good student was a rule follower. However, when she thought of a bright student, LaTisha’s mother pictured a path-maker who was “blazing their own trail in some way… not just mediocrity. With ‘bright,’ the sky’s the limit; with ‘good,’ you’re going along with the masses.” Franklin’s parent thought
the good student followed the rules, and Michael’s mother defined a good student as engaged because,

If you engage in what’s going on, you can learn something about not only what the teacher’s saying but even with a new perspective or a different [take]on it, so that makes you willing to learn about more than just staying in your own little box.

For Deborah’s parent, good students were those who did their best. She rejected society’s definition of “the one who gets good grades, all these scores, and all kinds of activities.” For Malik’s parent, a good student could tell what was needed for success in a particular assignment, exhibited enthusiasm, and had confidence. Charles’s parent described a good student as one who has the tools to maximize potential, was willing to learn, and contributed to the learning environment. He noted that, “There are a lot of good students, but that bright student really does shine in those situations and[had]a willingness to step up not just to help themselves but to help others.”

The interviewed parents of gifted students in ACISD seemed to understand the process for identification and remembered their children’s progress throughout the program. Although they understood the overall design, some details of the program services became unclear as the students began moving into high school AP courses.

Franklin’s parent described her child in second grade as a distraction when he finished his work before the rest of the students. The teacher recommended him for the Gifted and Talented Program, he was screened, and he began receiving gifted services the next semester. Franklin’s parent understood that the district offered the program beginning in kindergarten and noted, “It changes when you get to high school” because gifted students were served through AP in grades 10-12.
LaTisha’s parent had resided in other local districts and had moved to ACISD to participate in the gifted program. The parent’s mother was an educator of gifted students and identified her grandchild as intellectually advanced, but “unfortunately the district we were in had only a pullout classroom twice a week for GT.” The family moved because ACISD “had a full time program…so we were better able to meet her needs.” LaTisha’s parent also shared stories of students whose families had the financial means for their children to go to private schools but “chose to stay right here because of the reputation that [AC ISD] has.”

The two parents of students participating in AP classes also remembered when and why their children had begun advanced academic courses. Aubrey’s and Michael’s parents discussed the children’s wanting more challenging coursework. His parent recalled Michael had declared classes in elementary school were “boring to him” and thought Pre-AP would provide the challenge he sought. Michael’s parent had prior experience with the gifted program through her grandson, who had been living with the family at the time, so she had some understanding of and supported the gifted program in ACISD. She shared that “there’s different levels, so I guess you don’t want a student to be in kindergarten that’s more advanced and someone doesn’t know how to read or doesn’t know their colors. And you want to keep them engaged.” Parents of both gifted and AP children shared their support of the program design and praised the quality of both the GT and the AP program.

When parents were presented various scenarios as part of the interview, they preferred the ACISD program model compared to the other program options provided to them. These scenarios can be found in Appendix C. None of the parents endorsed an advanced academics option with strict attendance criteria for inclusion or continued participation. While they acknowledged the importance of attendance, all expressed concern that illness, family
emergencies, or other events outside the student’s control would prohibit him or her from participating in advanced academics programs. A few parents seemed concerned about the testing component in any program because of test anxiety, lack of familiarity with the tests themselves, or students not being able to best show their learning or potential in testing situations. Every parent supported scenario C: A district allows any student who is willing to work, is prepared, and has an interest in the subject to take Pre-AP or AP courses. Much discussion centered on the “prepared” portion of the description. If the students were prepared by previous courses, families seemed comfortable with offering them a challenge.

Aubrey’s parent exemplified the common parent response when she shared that the ACISD scenario, “gives everyone a chance regardless of what [how] you might test or how many days you missed….It just opens up the door for anyone who wants to.” Franklin’s parent reiterated the need for standards of performance, however. He pointed out that an open door policy provided the opportunity for students who wanted the challenge and exhibited a work ethic, but he also supported the standards that ensured the quality of the class remained intact, noting, “they might be willing to work maybe part of the time but not all of the time; then they would be taken out of those courses so it doesn’t affect or disrupt the entire class.” Michael’s and Charles’s parents added that a focus on behavior or willingness to do the work is important for success in advanced courses.

Many of the parents supported acknowledging growth as an accomplishment. LaTisha’s parent emphasized that the student who continues to work and grow is the one who successful in advanced courses. Opining that intelligence is not the biggest predictor of success, she touted hardworking students as deserving an opportunity to excel, favoring the person remaining at the end of the race over the one who starts it “high and fast and burning bright.”
Charles’s father thanked the researcher for pursuing the topic of African American students in advanced academics courses. He noted,

You know, it’s so important. It’s one thing to do as a parent from the outside. But to have someone on the inside to say this. No one even knows we’re pushing, and we have a plan for [our son]. Nobody’s come to us.

The parents appeared to be asking for help from the schools for their children. The parents whose children were involved in gifted and advanced academics seemed to have received this support. Many others had not, as noted by Charles’s father.

Families’ Making Academic Decisions in High School

All seven parents discussed how their families made academic decisions with their children. A common process included sitting down, reviewing the options, and making the decisions together. All but one parent perceived the process to have been successful, with the students receiving the classes that they chose. Most children’s parents perceived that they modeled collaboration, planning, decision-making, and evaluation processes with their children.

Deborah’s parent considered the practice of discussing high-school courses as preparation for decision-making in the future. Charles’s parent considered gathering data as part of the decision-making process. The family talked with the counselor so they would have better information when they sat down with their son. “I explained his background, I told her the information that I wanted her to know…about specifically that question: What can we do to prepare him for college?” This parent was proactive in obtaining information, yet he was unsatisfied with the amount and type of information he received.

Michael’s parent was upset because her children had made changes to their schedules without her knowledge. Her son had changed the course selection sheet after he left home with
the signed document, taking himself out of a PSAT/SAT preparation class, and her daughter had
removed herself from an AP class during the year. The parent described these situations as
disagreements about choices for keeping them on track. When her son was able to opt out of the
PSAT/SAT class, she told him, “You need to opt in.” He refused, and she disagreed that
students should have the final say on course choices, saying, “They tell parents they want them
to be engaged, but the kids pretty much have the final say over which courses they take, which I
don’t think is very good. I don’t.” This parent was concerned that the children might not be
prepared for college, the college admissions process, and future academic challenges and was
upset that they had circumvented her system. She seemed unaware that she could have interacted
with the school to request changes to her children’s schedules, but later said she would not have
forced her child to take a class that the child refused to take.

Parental understandings of reasons students chose challenging classes like GT, Pre-AP,
and AP varied. Most parents wanted their children to access the most challenging course work
they could. On the other hand, if an able student were not willing to take on the challenge of
more rigorous courses, parents were not inclined to force them to do so. Michael’s mother
recounted a story about her granddaughter who was living with her. “The teacher had spoken
with her [the granddaughter] about moving into a Pre-AP English class, and she said no because
she didn’t want to put forth the time or the effort.” Michael’s mother decided that she could not
force her granddaughter to participate in rigorous courses when the child was satisfied with the
general education class. Charles’s and Deborah’s parents indicated that making sure the students
could navigate high school was a priority before moving into advanced classes. Both reported
planning to have their children participate in advanced courses next year because they are
earning As and Bs in current general education courses.
Regardless of the level of courses taken by the students, the parents and students offered several reasons for not choosing advanced courses including not wanting the challenge, the course’s not being offered, and student’s not wanting to be pushed beyond his or her current performance level. Some parents recalled that no one had ensured that their children were aware of the availability of the advanced courses, even when they had the ability to be successful. Deborah’s parent, who had taken AP herself, shared, “She definitely has the ability to take the courses, but they haven’t been offered to her.”

In some cases, the parents perceived that the children, although capable, had not been pushed to work beyond their current levels of performance. Charles’s parent recognized need for a standard for advanced courses, but did not want able students who had not been pushed or encouraged at home to be excluded. He explained,

In our home if you’re an “A” student and capable of making an “A,” and you’re bringing home a “C,” that’s not [acceptable], but if all you can bring home is a “B,” and you bring home a “B,” you’re praised as if it was an “A.” …“Are you doing the absolute best that you can do?” And that’s why we want to see Charles in AP classes next year.

Even though the parents seemed to believe that advanced courses were beneficial for their children, they wanted to explain challenges of the more rigorous coursework for their children and help them anticipate the potential difficulties. Deborah’s parent, who had experience with AP classes, highlighted the psycho-social impact of the challenge.

I’d let them know that there are some challenges. And to make sure that before we decide together…if they want to take these courses, that they’re ready for them. Because getting kicked out of the courses is kinda like a let-down or a failure, and I don’t want that to be
something that they have to live with. So, I wouldn’t necessarily say “discourage,” but I would definitely let them know the pros and cons.

Malik’s parent echoed the need for understanding her child and what he needed. His mother perceived that if someone pushed Malik too much, he withdrew. She found that giving him information and options and allowing him to make the final decision worked in their family. She told him that not being in AP did not mean he was not smart or going to get into the college he wanted. She felt that approach served both the school and the making of life decisions for her son.

Most parents agreed that the gifted identification was not necessary for success in AP. What was needed was willingness to work and preparedness. Deborah’s parent explained, “If you’re focused, you can definitely achieve your goal…If a student is hardworking and willing to do the work, and they’re prepared, why shouldn’t they be allowed to do so?”

Charles’s parent shared two stories of teachers who made a difference to him or his son. He believed a bolder outcome in course decision-making could often be traced to an educator who became a hero for the supported child. A counselor who pushed this father to “really advance and not just become complacent in who I was.” The father reflected that, “Sometimes those teachers can affect a child…in a way that a parent can’t.” Charles’s parent shared that Charles was a good person who would rise to the challenge, but he needed pushing. A sixth grade teacher had inspired learning for Charles, and the father wished

there was a [Mr.____] even in high school that could encourage him from that way….I would want them to know that my son is impressionable…and he can be basically formed to do great things if we give him the opportunity and encourage[ment].
The majority of the parents interviewed reported that their families employed a team approach to making decisions regarding course selection for their children. All mentioned the impact of school personnel such as teachers or counselors. They said that they took advantage of the decision-making process to interact with their children about current school progress, future goals, and which courses fit that plan. Some parents were more proactive than others about requesting school support. Franklin’s parent admitted “I have probably met with every counselor every year since he was in second grade.”

At least two parents, Charles’s and Michael’s, wanted the counselors to be more proactive with sharing information and opportunities that would help their child. Michael’s parent wanted the counselor “to be engaged with the parent” about the child’s future and not only call when a problem existed. While understanding that counselors served hundreds of students, parents wanted counselors to contact them promptly about their child.

Turning Challenges into Success

The findings from the parent data about how families supported their children is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the components of educational success as viewed by the parents. The second part presents findings concerning success in advanced academics.

The components of success in education discussed by the parents included the impact of families, positive school experiences, and attitudes of students. These are discussed in turn in this section.

Each family member articulated several details about the importance of family involvement. They saw extended family and those related by choice, such as a church family or families of the children’s friends, as influences on their children. The GT parents commented specifically on the cohorts of classmates who were progressing through the GT program with
their children and how they brought positive support to one another’s school experiences. LaTisha’s parent shared that several families of GT and AP students had the same sustained mindset and focus on academics. Franklin’s parent reflected on the importance of sustaining groups of families who were “involved in some way with our children.” It should be noted that only one of the students whose parent was interviewed was living with both biological parents at the time of the study.

The interviewed parents commented on the positive, though not always perfect, relationships they shared with their children. In addition to their ability to communicate and problem-solve as a parent-child team, parents reported that they were also clear in setting expectations for their children’s performance in school. Franklin’s mother underscored the value of the open line of communication she shared with her son while also establishing the boundaries and guidelines for his success, noting that she never forgot she was the parent, not a friend.

Family support systems influenced all of the children who were taking AP. LaTisha’s parent reiterated how the home fostered motivation to succeed because “when you have those expectations already set at home, and when you have parents that are involved, then it’s really hard to hold them back….That’s a big, huge difference.”

Aubrey’s parent used a community approach to help children successfully navigate challenging coursework and establish her role for responsible parenting. She valued the support of other parents in the child-rearing process.

There’s that support system that they [children] might have from their friends who might be taking AP courses. And then the support system for parents who have students that are taking AP courses. And you can talk to that parent and say, “My daughter is struggling
with this. Did your daughter come home with this?...having the like-mindedness parents with you, you’re raising your own child.

Some parents supported their children’s concept of the importance of education by modeling. They discussed going back to college themselves. Aubrey’s mother encouraged her children to go to college right away and not follow the same path that she had. She had started a family and gotten married right after high school, and when she divorced, she decided to go back to school, one semester at a time. Then she started working, going to school, and raising children full time, admitting,

Someone should have told me something! But [all laughing] it was a lot of nights where she saw me up. It was a lot of nights that I was studying. A lot of nights that I am going to the football game, but I have my laptop. Or I’m going to this meeting but I’ve gotta leave; “I’ve got somebody picking you up, I’ve got class.” So she saw that, and I would tell her, “You know, you have the opportunity to just go. You have no responsibilities. It’s just you. And I’m giving you that opportunity. You have it. Don’t waste it. Don’t follow in my footsteps.”

Families talked about the impact that family modeling had on their children as family members attended college or pursued challenging coursework. LaTisha’s mother noted that seeing parents struggle can be “a wonderful learning tool. I have my degree, but I am going back to grad school now….I think she sees even with [struggles], education is power.”

Michael’s mother believed her son would be successful because he had witnessed his parents’ focus on education. Although his mother had attended college for four years after high school, she left to raise a family. She finally graduated in 2012. He son saw her working online, taking courses, “staying up at night, going to bed at 4:00, getting up at 7:00, and doing it all over
again,” proving that “it’s never too late.” His maternal grandfather intended to support Michael financially when he entered college. Michael’s mother also described inspiring an adult friend to return to school although this decision required a cross-country move and job transfer. With strong role models, positive relationships, and support from family social gatherings parents believed their children would be successful. The parents of Deborah, Malik, and Charles celebrated the opportunities that arose from family interaction. Deborah was a big sister to her brothers and cousins, and Malik’s mother surrounded him with individuals who would contribute to his personal and academic success.

Some parents provided or supported opportunities to enrich the students learning during the summer months. Michael’s parent created structured time during the summer to sustain engagement and skills. Charles’s parent wanted to take advantage of summer online offerings for his son. Students recounted additional opportunities such as leadership camp that their families supported.

Overall the interviewed parents shared positive school experiences of their children. Some students struggled with individual circumstances in school, but generally their progress was steady and forward. Many of the parents reported the excitement of their children when their learning was engaging. Charles’s parent recalled that his son was a fast learner who was very excited about projects and actively participated in school, resulting in no discipline issues and missing straight “As” by one point this school year.

Each family member had an idea of what success in advanced academics entailed, and most centered on the necessity of dedication and perseverance. Aubrey’s parent mentioned the need for dedication of both the parent and the child for academic success, which she described as “Just to stick with it. Even when it’s hard. Even when you don’t understand it. Even when you
want to say, ‘Forget this. I don’t have to do this.’” She emphasized that dedication must be continued regardless of what was happening around you. Students needed to sustain dedication and focus even when their peers made different choices. When some of Aubrey’s senior friends had chosen easy classes for this year, her mother gave her this advice, “Hard work, it will pay off. You study hard and do everything now; you can play later. But if you play now, you are going to be working your butt off as an adult.” LaTisha’s parent agreed and had been pleased with her daughter’s choices. Her friends had scheduled free periods, but LaTisha was taking several AP courses and using her free time wisely to support the AP load.

Deborah’s mother reiterated the need for dedication and focus. She thought Deborah would be successful in advanced classes because of her current positive and effective study habits and the mother’s determination to help her stay focused. By continuing the dialogue that education is important and that AP courses can possibly earn college credit, Deborah’s mother intended to help with motivation.

Franklin’s mother mentioned the need for personal sacrifice in conjunction with dedication. To be successful at more rigorous classes, students chose to give up some leisure and free time. She added,

My son is a teenager. He’d rather be in front of that TV, playing his video games…he’s actually setting a precedent for himself and, you know, his children when he’s older. Coming from a family that has limited college education, it was important to me that my son would understand that that’s the only option that he has….So I think the dedication is a big, big part of it.

Several parents mentioned the need for balance for success in advanced classes. Aubrey’s parent discussed purposefully helping her child work through learning how to balance
responsibilities by discerning what the child could and could not handle and being able to balance the AP courses. Along with “dedication” and “perseverance,” parents advocated “hard work.” They thought intelligence alone did not assure success for the students. Deborah’s parent agreed, stating, “If you’re focused, you can definitely achieve your goal…If a student is hardworking and willing to do the work, and they’re prepared, why shouldn’t they be allowed?”

Several parents discussed the concept of managing time in conjunction with being dedicated and focused for advanced academics success. Michael’s parent used the term “time management” to indicate a necessary component in maintaining a schedule for incorporating the work of advanced classes. She noted,

I don’t know any parent whose child is in the Pre-AP courses that [has] anything negative to say about it. Because you know on the front end it’s going to require more of their time….He’s in band, and they have all these different things going on. He has Pre-AP courses in maybe three or four different classes, and they all have homework, and…[need to be] able to juggle all that’s involved and still be successful at it.

Michael’s mother said that she could not really help him with the time management and prioritizing. On a Thursday night when her son had a marching band performance during a football game, he might not get home until midnight. He then ate something and set his alarm for 3:00 A.M. because he still had homework to complete for four Pre-AP and AP classes. Because of this rigorous schedule, “he’s actually gotten better in school. He’s learned how to focus his time.”

Since the advanced course curriculum contained college-level material, missing class or giving half effort would result in failure now and later. Deborah’s parent reiterated the need to “be focused so you shouldn’t be missing school.” Michael’s parent believed that “having the
right attitude” included showing up every day and doing your best because “if you are really
interested, and you want to do well, you will do anything that it takes, but you will prioritize
what you have to do to make sure you’re successful.”

Another element that most families agreed helped students was encouragement from
others including family, friends, classmates, teachers, and counselors. All families mentioned
their children’s encouragement from others to try and continue in more challenging coursework
without wavering. Charles’s parent presented how encouragement to accept a challenge from
other family members could build confidence. He said that Charles was “very conscious of
others when it comes to engaging.”

Barriers and Struggles

Families discussed some barriers to accessing appropriate courses including low
expectations, a lack of information, differences in individual learning that do not match teaching
styles, and the stress and pressure associated with advanced classes. They perceived that some of
these barriers could be removed. Stress and pressure

One parent, new to the school district, shared a story that might explain why some
students might now have been offered advanced courses. If the information explaining advanced
course options were not provided by the counseling office and the student were new to the
school, the student might wait an entire year before information about the courses were offered.
Charles’s parent discussed a lack of information as contributing to his not signing his son up for
advanced classes when they first arrived in the district. He mentioned that his son might have
been taking summer classes online or taking Pre-AP classes now, but he was not aware of their
availability. He mentioned there was a specific course for parents offered on a weeknight that he
believed added to parent knowledge and awareness of opportunities in the district. He expressed
thankfulness for the course and asked that it be offered on weekends for working parents like himself who could not attend in the evenings.

Only Charles’s father shared any instances in which being African American played role in their experiences. The first story he shared occurred in another district where his college-going daughter was discouraged by the counselor she asked for help. She was told “don’t worry about it- you just need a trade.” The father, who was living in another state at the time, said, “As a distant parent,--you talk about somebody going unglued…And to have that happen to undermine what we’re trying to achieve!” At the time of the interview, the daughter was in college with at full-time job in admissions and doing well. This family experience contributed to the limited trust of this family in school personnel. They wanted to be partners but were cautious. The parent also recounted a story about Charles’s friends and questions they were asking him. Charles reported at home, “Somebody asked me today if my mom was white.” The stepmother is white; she and Charles’s dad were married in 2011, but she was rarely at the school. When asked why his friends asked this question, Charles said, “I don’t know. Why would they ask me? Look at me. I’m dark. I don’t look like I have a white mama.” The family concluded that the African American friends assumed that the student living in a nice house who spoke differently from them had a white mother. The family expressed concern that stereotypes were perpetuated by the African American community.

Barriers for success in general education courses occurred when the individual needs of the students were not considered. Parents perceived that some students would struggle to learn the material without consideration for their learning styles. Malik’s parent stressed that educators needed to work with students individually. When three or four students did not want to do the work or could not do the work, they needed one-on-one support. In addition to academic help,
they needed encouragement from someone who said, “Hey you can do this. I know you can.”
Malik’s parent worked with children in high school, and she said encouragement “works every
time. We might not start on good terms, but at the end of the day, they might think you are strict,
they might think you are mean, but they know I do that because I care.”

Sometimes the school setting demanded learning from books when students might learn
better from experience. Malik’s mother saw that situation with her child and noted, “As far as
academics are concerned, he’s a pretty smart kid. When it comes to the books, the theory, he’s a
little slow at that.” She shared that being able to learn at his pace usually resulted in success.

Deborah’s mother explained that a difference between the teaching style of the teacher
and the learning styles of the student inhibited learning. She experienced that kind of disconnect
as a student herself. She said someone might be a “doer” who must physically do something in
order to learn, and another student might be able to watch someone else complete the problem
and understand it. She perceived that the teacher needed to understand the differences in learning
styles.

Two other types of barriers were mentioned by parents as challenges to a student’s
success. Malik’s parent talked about her child’s having a chronic illness that was exacerbated by
stress, fatigue, and the pressure often associated with AP classes. Michael’s parent shared that
Michael “has to share his parents…because we’ve taken in kids, and he doesn’t like that.” These
two specific situations created a challenge for the families involved. Similar physical or
social/emotional barriers to inclusion in advanced courses might be present for other students, as
well.

Part of the allure of advanced academics classes like AP was the college-level learning
that occurred. A reality of the fast-pace, level of difficulty, and depth of study on high school
students was stress and pressure. This condition of sustained demand was perceived as a barrier to success for the GT, AP, and Pre-AP students whose parents were interviewed. Pressure to perform could be tempered by support from family and peers.

LaTisha’s parent lamented that sometimes teachers put too much emphasis on what the child should know. Some students could handle the pressure or put the pressure on themselves without external reminders. LaTisha’s mother admitted that many AP students were already intrinsically motivated, and sometimes external pressure “shuts them down more than it motivates, so it’s a fine line in there. Are you motivating, or are you intimidating?” Similarly Aubrey’s parent wanted to remind educators that her daughter was a child “still my baby….You are still dealing with a child even though some children look like they’re our ages and so it’s easy to step back and look at them as an adult.” LaTisha’s and Franklin’s parents agreed with that caution. Franklin’s parent added, “Although my son is 15, and he has all of these accelerated classes, he’s still the kind of kid that wants to come and lay in the bed with you on Saturday morning, you know. He still has that very child-like mentality.” They worried that teachers being too demanding might turn students away from advanced academics and caring about school.

Charles’s parent agreed that his family knew a little bit about advanced courses, but felt more information to use with children to facilitate a discussion at home or at the dinner table was important and should “not always be at the convenience more so, of the faculty.” He asked that the family schedule be considered.

Encouragement of students to try the rigorous courses was supported by all interviewed parents. Malik’s parent said, “If they start taking that class and they see that they aren’t comfortable or are not passing, and you’ve tried everything and that kid has tried everything, let
them out. But if they want to try, definitely.” Charles’s parent echoed that stance and reported that his son believes advanced classes should be pushed more. He added, “I think some are so afraid of failing at something that they don’t try it, and others have to be to some degree pushed into it. And they will do well.”

Michael’s parent shared a concern that students might want to stop taking advanced courses because of curriculum and pacing that were demanding for the students. She noted that many students were in the AP courses and juggling several activities, saying, “I understand how they can get frustrated, mad, and think, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore. This is just too hard.’”

Charles’s dad recounted a story about a family member who took challenging AP courses but was not prepared by the elementary and middle school curriculum, nor did he have anyone to support him. This child managed to work his way through the course, but he did not benefit as much from the experience as he could have with preparation and support.

One parent cautioned that a lack of AP on the transcript did not mean a student could not be successful in college. It was important to know what the child could handle. The parent of one of the students without AP experience, Malik, noted it’s important to know “what you are comfortable with….Because you are not in AP, that doesn’t mean you aren’t going to get into a great college.”

Parents Embrace Challenge as a Positive Force

All interviewed parents valued the challenge that AP, GT, and Pre-AP courses offered. They saw the courses as preparation for growth that could ensure access to a rewarding future. Franklin’s mother heralded the advantage for any student able to navigate the program. She considered challenging courses an “eye-opener” for her son on a journey that would not end with high school. AP was a stepping stone for extra credits going into college. Aubrey’s parent
supported the concept of challenge, noting that with her daughter had always been consumed by challenge that pushed her even further. “She wants that. And it’s also something that I have encouraged. I encourage all three of my children even though they are all totally different people. Don’t settle for what the average is because you have above-average thinking.”

LaTisha’s parent mentioned the opportunity to get college credit by taking AP classes, but her daughter, who had test anxiety, had not earned a qualifying score on an AP test at this point and was disappointed. They chose to look at the positive elements in this experience. The daughter had mastered the daily rigor of the college level class, and was “getting those struggles over now while she has a strong support group of all of her teachers, and parents and everyone instead of hitting that wall like I did later on in life.” Aubrey’s parent acknowledged the difficulty of working through a challenging class coupled with the joy of success when challenges were overcome. Aubrey’s mom challenged the concept of turning away from challenge. When her daughter was struggling with AP Calculus, she had wanted to drop the class, and the mother asked, “What you getting out of it for?” and Aubrey responded with, “I’m not doing good.” Mom’s reaction was,

You’re not going to do good in everything. It’s not put there for you to do excellent. You know, I always go right back to the life world, the work world. In the real world, you are just not going to succeed in everything you do…. it’s okay to struggle a little bit

To learn to work through challenges, parents reported that students had to try different approaches, including prioritizing. LaTisha’s parent mentioned prioritizing from both a student and a parent perspective. She thought that parents should not demand so much from their children, and children should sometimes limit their focus. Children sometimes needed guidance with establishing priorities. She gave an example of a time LaTisha had to prioritize and
ultimately chose to stay in an AP class when her mother had given her permission to exit. The mother reported,

She wrote me a persuasive essay [laughter] and it was so good I just texted her back and said, “You know, you brought up some good points, and you need to, if you feel like this is what you need to do, I want to support you.” And then she decided not to do it. She said, “I want to stay in the AP class even if I don’t get the score that gives me credit.”...And she made that choice, and I was real proud of her.

Not all of the challenges were academic. Some were personal. For example, Franklin’s parent shared that her son was an only child for a long time. When she remarried, her son had a sibling for the first time, causing a period of transition in middle school when he was not the center of attention any longer. Mom reported that “In high school he realized, ‘You know what - it is what it is,’ And he takes every day as if, hey, we’re going to make this a good day.” He had worked through the personal challenge that being a part of a blended family created. Franklin’s mom reported that he brought renewed focus and energy to his newly challenging academics in tenth grade.

Focus on the Future: College and Careers

Every parent discussed the importance of school success for their children’s futures. All but one included advanced academics courses in that discussion. The focus was on college success, and some mentioned the promising career that would follow.

Parents of LaTisha, Franklin, and Aubrey agreed that successful participation in advanced classes had an impact on college credits and performance. Realizing college would be a place to work, not just play, emerged as an important theme for these parents. Aubrey’s parent added that for many students the goal was to graduate from high school, and they seldom saw
beyond that point. For her daughter, high school was a stepping stone to life after high school. She relayed that Aubrey was one of the youth leaders at the church, where her peers responded to questions about the future with, “Oh, I’m just trying to graduate [from high school].” She challenged them with, “Whatcha doing after?” Aubrey’s mother believes that advanced academics retrained her daughter to think beyond the end of high school.

Michael’s parent echoed the thought that high school was not the end of education. She wanted her other children to see an older daughter in college. She had seen other young people “just want to get out of there and [never] want to do it again” She encouraged students who were not in a Pre-AP or AP class to “find something that you really like to do, and do it. Go to school…and do something that makes you happy that you don’t mind doing every day.”

Another benefit of successful advanced academics course participation, according to LaTisha’s parent, was learning to set and meet personal and academic goals. “It’s not just about the academic information and rigor that they’re going to get, but it’s also about setting those short term goals and the long term goals… meeting those and then kinda seeing what’s down the long haul.” Franklin’s mother reminded that, “even as adults, we still set those little goals for ourselves and what we want to do. We still want to accomplish something…[and] it gives them that mindset that they use for the rest of their lives.” She reported that because her family boasted few college graduates, the goal of college had been ever-present for her son.

I’ve trained him since he was little. This is what your goal is going to be, to get to college, and that’s when your life is finally going to be your own….I ‘m excited about the part that he knows he’s going to survive without me.

Part of the preparation for college that parents valued centered on students familiarity with college-level work before they arrived on the college campus. This would ease the students
into their independent academic university lives. Michael’s parent relayed that because of her AP experiences in high school, a college-aged daughter viewed some of her college work as “a refresher course for her.”

Deborah’s parent also supported AP courses in high school because of the college preparation. “If they’d like to go to college, it really helps them out so they won’t be surprised about the difficulty of courses once they get into college.” Sometimes an employer considered a college degree an advantage. If the job application stated the need for a college degree, the college experience gave the applicant an edge. Charles’s father had witnessed the advantage that the college degree could bring when he worked with military veterans. Not having the college degree separated many applicants from potential jobs even when they could have ably performed the required tasks.

The parents with children in AP classes agreed that struggle and lower grades in AP classes in high school were a good investment for the college futures and a predictor of college success. When asked how a parent might know if a child were prepared for more rigorous classes, Deborah’s mother said students who might be getting straight A’s, or mostly A’s with a few C’s and B’s in current courses were ready to try more challenging courses such as AP courses. This same parent believed children must qualify for these gifted classes because she was afraid the students would not be ready.

Although Charles had been preparing for college by taking a pre-SAT or SAT preparation class during this year, his family had been cautious about his beginning AP courses. The student was cautious because the last time he had changed schools, differences in states’ and schools’ standards had required him to catch up. He had been successful this year and planned to
take AP classes the next year. This caution seemed to stem from past experiences and might be a consideration in enrollment of new students.

The parents interviewed for the study supported their children’s education and wanted the best opportunities for their futures. For most of the parents, gifted and advanced courses supported the family goals of college.

Responses to the Research Questions

Summaries of the results of the case studies of the three groups of students and of parents of some students are presented in the sections that follow as they pertain to the research questions. A cross-case summary of data responsive to each question is presented, in turn. Response to Question 1 required consideration of themes held in common among the student groups and the themes that were unique or uniquely viewed by one group or another. Response to Question 2 required summary of the data collected from the parents. Response to Question 3 required comparison of the perceptions of the students to those of their parents.

In the presentation of the findings, each question is answered individually. In the presentation of answers to Question 1, Groups 1, 2, and 3 are presented individually, in comparison to one another and lastly as one group of 12. In the presentation of answers to Question 2 findings, the parent group is presented as one group. In the presentation of answers to Question 3, ways that the students and parents align are presented first, and ways that the students and parents do not align are presented next.

Summary of Findings for Question 1

What are the perspectives of native-born African American participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?
Group 1 answer to question 1. Group 1 students exhibited reverence for the GT/AP responses to the program as an opportunity for African American GT/AP students at AC ISD. They attributed several positive characteristics to the program and to their individual educational development because of the program. To successfully participate in the advanced courses, students viewed themselves as having developed independence, autonomy, focus, a work ethic, collaborative skills, and a higher level of thinking. They embraced authentic learning experiences and looked for further growth, challenge, and experiencing new things in the future. Their inclusion in the gifted program stemmed, Group 1 thought, from an educator’s having recommended they be tested to receive GT services because they were performing academically above their peers.

It seemed to the researcher that because the Group 1 students had been a part of a rigorous learning environment early in their schooling, the level of challenge they experienced there had influenced their cognitive development from an early age, and they continued to seek this standard. Choosing AP courses in high school was the communicated expectation for the GT students, and these students were prepared for this challenge.

When they lacked preparation from work in earlier grades or because of individual choices, the Group 1 students were sometimes not successful. Students shared stories about having procrastinated on assignments and not performing well or having had a teacher who did not fully teach the prescribed GT curriculum. For these students, stress was manifested as angst over grades, perfectionism, lack of preparation, or not wanting to disappoint a teacher. If a GT student in Group 1 were not successful in an AP class and wanted to exit, a parent, teacher, or counselor had guided them to stay and overcome the obstacles. One student (LaTisha) even talked herself out of leaving a class after her mom had given permission for her to exit.
What the researcher found was that once students had successfully navigated these rigorous courses, they did not want to return to the general education classroom. They framed the general education environment as slow-paced, prescriptive, and unchallenging. The students in Group 1 perceived that the students in the general education program were satisfied with a minimalist mindset of just passing the class and graduating from high school. GT students did not want to be a part of that stagnant environment.

Group 1 students noted what they still did not understand or wanted to know about their GT or AP courses. One concern expressed by Group 1 was about the practice of mixing Pre-AP and GT students in middle school math and high school classes because of disparity in skills, work ethic, and commitment to the programs of these two groups. Students were confused about mixing the two groups of students at what they saw as a random point in the continuum of courses, when earlier in their school careers, the two groups were part of courses delivered separately and impacted by acceptance of GT students due to qualifications.

Barriers perceived by Group 1 to the inclusion of students, in general, in the GT and AP programs were student lack of knowledge of college and the district’s systems of preparation for college. Students experienced fear of failure and/or the stress that resulted from a hefty work load.

The reasons Group 1 students provided for choosing to participate in advanced academics courses included the rigorous and challenging learning these courses offered. Students also noted intangible benefits such as a resulting perceived self-efficacy, ability to focus, and being academically successful at an advanced level. Students in Group 1 also cited their ability to overcome an academic challenge, as evidenced in AP, and apply their skills to future challenges in college, work, and life as reasons for taking AP courses.
The students found that the ACISD advanced academics system provided opportunities for students to be recognized for accomplishments, to learn to respond well to being academically challenged, and to learn how to persevere and gain confidence in their ability. They also chose AP courses for preparation for college and life and to earn college credits as well as to explore what they might want to study in college.

Differences between group 1 and other groups. Themes that emerged in Group 1 but did not emerge for Group 2 or Group 3 included the negative qualities associated with AP-GT such as fear of failure, stress, and the amount of work. Group 1 also discussed negative interactions with family about attending historically black colleges, not being street smart, and whether a college education was needed for a prosperous future. Group 1 uniquely promoted what they saw as positive attributes of AP such as developing as a caring individual, being set apart from peers, and deliberately developing self. Group 2 students also alluded to but did not state directly the positive attributes of AP like being set apart from peers and deliberately developing oneself. Group 3 did not address these themes in any way.

Group 2 answer to question 1. The students in Group 2 supported students’ involvement in AP courses. They cited attributes and opportunities provided by the AP program that were similar to those stated by Group 1. They said the AP program in ACISD required independent preparation by students in and out of class, and it fostered project-orientation, fast-paced learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving approaches to learning. AP students in Group 2 perceived their AP peers had a mindset similar to theirs, and they were focused, intelligent, and respectful of their education and educators. The work that they encountered required them to explain their thinking beyond merely providing the answers, to engage, to analyze, and to simultaneously manage several assignments and deadlines. When Group 2 students talked about
general education courses, their word choices included “babied,” “step-by-step,” “worksheet,” “fill out material from the book,” “exactly what you need to know,” and “a lot of group work.”

The Group 2 students perceived the AP environment as rigorous yet relaxed, both demanding and engaging. As described by Group 2, the general education classes were less demanding, offered ample free time, and often stretched an introductory “bell-ringer” into a 30 minute segment of a 45 minute class. Group 2 AP students had been bored with the slow pacing. Pre-AP class structures were an important part of the unique information that this group shared. They reported the Pre-AP courses were focused but limited. They lacked the urgency of the AP classes. For example, if students finished the allotted work for the day in a Pre-AP class, they were finished working. No sense was fostered of seeking abundant material or thinking about multiple intellectual avenues simultaneously. Pre-AP was like general education in that the students had free time if they were finished. Students considered this type of Pre-AP classroom environment inadequate preparation for the demands of an AP class.

Group 2 students started taking AP courses at the recommendation of a teacher or a counselor whom they described as “persistent.” For the two females in the group who attended the same high school, participating in AP classes was seen as part of the school culture. The two males from two different high schools did not mention similar cultures on their campuses. After these two students had participated in AP classes, they said they continued to sign up because they wanted to surround themselves with like-minded students. Continuing to prepare for college and career, looking for a college major, and potentially saving college dollars were also reasons for taking AP courses provided by students in Group 2. The theme of saving money in college with AP courses and AP tests was a stronger conversation in Group 2 than in Group 1.
When discussing what AP students do when they struggle in a demanding AP class, the first answer of Group 2 students was to work with the teachers, especially through tutoring. Teachers helped them understand the material better and made the classes engaging. Group 2 students viewed themselves as surrounded by AP peers and using every available minute and resource to accomplish their goal of passing AP classes and tests. They used class time, down time in electives, free periods such as “senior out,” social media, and the internet to do homework collectively. They put in time and effort and utilized time management strategies. They evaluated how they were doing with the juggling of advanced classes within their lives. They employed metacognition to evaluate, learn, and grow from their academic decision-making. All students in this group iterated that failing a class was not acceptable to their parents, and this expectation motivated them to succeed.

What I found out as a researcher from Group 2 was that although an academic “push” before AP needed to happen for these students, the advanced academic experience they relished was available only in an AP class. Students shared that the way to help students remain in an AP class once they took the risk of signing up for one was to prepare them better for the reality of an AP class before they got there. Group 2 saw that some students were able to persist and adjust; they thought the anguish and self-doubt that accompany being unprepared in an AP class could be avoided. The lucky students who stayed grew to believe in their own abilities and to develop self efficacy.

Students reported that they rarely talked to counselors for counseling about classes or college information. They received information from peers and teachers. The only nod counselors received from Group 2 was that some participants said the counselors were
responsible for Pre-AP or AP class sign up. Otherwise, students said they saw counselors only for schedule changes.

How group 2 differed from groups 1 and 3. Group 2 students chose AP courses for reasons similar to those reported by Group 1, so they will not be repeated here. What was different for AP students in Group 2 was their experience of a few barriers in AP courses not reported by Group 1. These included the amount of work required and a lack of strategies for managing it before and during the struggle. Pre-AP had not prepared them for the transition to the college-level courses. “Intellectual differences” was a not a big part of the concerns of Group 2. They expressed no doubt of their potential. However, Group 2 students did rely more on positive self talk and positive support from others for success.

Group 2 seemed to appreciate hearing encouragement from other AP students and perceived it as having an impact on their decision-making about advanced academic course selection. Older students were perceived to have influenced some Group 2 students, a phenomenon not mentioned by Group 1. Group 2 students also mentioned the powerful negative impact when one person or teacher “puts you down.”

Another difference in Group 2 perceptions, as compared to Group 1, was the need for African American students, in general, to be “pushed.” Encouragement to accept the challenge was perceived as instrumental by Group 2, who perceived that they had needed to be told that they could do this work and reminded of its potential impact on their futures. They thought that African American students who did not progress to AP courses after taking Pre-AP were likely not exhibiting self-efficacy, and they commented on the frequency with which this occurred.

A barrier faced by Group 2 students, but not relevant to Group 1, was the perceived lack of a system for getting into AP, especially if Pre-AP were viewed as inadequate preparation for
AP. For Group 1, - once you were admitted to the GT system, you were on the AP pathway. For Group 2 students, the system included taking Pre-AP and then AP. This approach was not viewed as a system because, for these students, success depended on a peer, a parent, a teacher, or a counselor for encouragement and recognition. It was happenstance whether a student had someone who could recognize their potential and get them to the goal of full acceptance as an AP student. This was especially difficult if the students believed not taking AP after taking Pre-AP was a choice.

Preparation for future academic encounters was a subject for discussion by both Group 1 and Group 2, but Group 1 discussed more preparation for college and career. Group 2 focused more on preparation for AP courses while in high school. Neither group reported being fully supported with planning beyond high school. Students from both groups perceived that they needed more information about financial aid, applying to college, and whether they were actually prepared for college success.

Group 2 clearly attributed some of their success in AP to parents who would not accept failure. Family guidelines were discussed more extensively by Group 2 than Group 1, for whom external, parent-set guidelines were not an issue. Instead, Group 1 students were more likely to see negative peer relationships as a challenge associated with school and its programs. Group 3 was similar to Group 1 and Group 2 in distinguishing the rigor of advanced academics coursework from the general education courses they were taking. They did not find the general education coursework boring. Group 3 also presented planning for their future as an important theme, but they seemed to have less information about the pathways to college and career than students in Groups 1 and 2.
Group 3 answer to question 1. Group 3 students exhibited a cursory knowledge of the Pre-AP and AP program. They all had friends involved in these programs, which they considered time-consuming, challenging, and exclusionary if the student did not perform satisfactorily. Group 3 students were unsure which AP courses their schools offered. On the other hand, they described their general education classes with clarity. The general education classes provided student support with teacher modeling followed by completion of activities by the students. Group 3 students mentioned little homework, easy, free time, power point, worksheets, book work, and notes in their lists of descriptors and activities. The idea of expectations of completion versus excellence was a difference between the two types of classes as described by Group 3. The general education courses were predictable.

The four students in Group 3 had two different identities. The two seniors in the group had struggled with some academic courses and the End of Course (EOC) exams required for graduation in Texas. They perceived that they had not been invited into advanced courses because they were struggling to pass the minimum state standards. Malik was glad he was not invited to take AP because he had seen his friends struggle with them. The two sophomores were passing their high school classes with A’s and B’s although both reported having some difficulty with math. They had passed the EOC exams taken at the time of the interviews. These students were academically prepared for at least one Pre-AP class but had not chosen to do so. Instead, these students, new to the district, and their parents had elected to wait a year to see how they performed in general education classes before taking the risk of a more challenging class. Charles’s father, however, noted that they were not offered the Pre-AP courses when they initially signed up for classes. Ultimately, it seemed that the four students in Group 3 had exercised self-exclusion from Pre-AP courses and no one had challenged their choices.
Group 3 understood that taking an AP class exhibited the ability of the student to work hard and get a head start on college. They did not seem to understand that the AP choice carried with it opportunities to work with teachers and peers when help was needed with challenging material. Group 3 did not know how to be nor have a concept of being self-advocates within such a program nor had they weighed for themselves whether this academic choice might be worthy of moving outside their comfort zones.

The experiences reported by Group 3 students suggested that no one had been in place to answer questions or advocate for advanced courses for these students. These students did not know the difference between GT and Pre-AP/AP courses. They were not aware of how these courses might help a student in the transition to college, what the classes were like, or how the AP teacher teaches. They had a fear of the unknown and no one to help them with the missing knowledge.

Among the barriers that Group 3 faced as they considered the future were a common lack of career guidance in home or school. They did not have the coursework needed for selected careers, nor did they seem to understand the scholastic pathways associated with the professions they envisioned. Group 3 seemed to understand these pathways less than the students in Group 1 or Group 2. The students in AP courses understood that an individual who plans a career in medicine would be well advised to take college level courses in science, for example. The students in Group 3 appeared not to associate careers with academic knowledge prerequisites.

Group 3 differed in several other ways from Groups 1 and 2. Their descriptions of typical classrooms differed in that the stress-free environment of the general education classrooms were presented by Group 3 in a manner not pejorative or scornful. Compared to Groups 1 and 2, Group 3 students lacked a sense of urgency about their own learning or academic progress.
Struggles of Group 3 students were with basic level courses. Each student talked about past struggles. Two shared specific stories of lack of success in fifth grade math; another discussed the difficulty of the academic work in middle school; the fourth student shared the challenge of the high school transition, especially when changing schools. Passing EOC tests was also a challenge for two students in Group 3.

The findings for Question 1 indicated that the native-born African American students involved in advanced academics programs in ACISD appeared to have an understanding of how those programs would support their future goals of successful college completion. For students not involved in the advanced academics programs, some lack of knowledge existed.

Summary of Findings for Question 2

What are the perspectives of native-born African American family members of participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?

In the presentation of answers to Question 2 findings, the parent group is presented as one group including discussion of knowledge of advanced academics programs, reasons for choosing or not choosing advanced courses, the learning styles of their children, and how schools and other communities could support African American families with choosing advance academics.

Most of the interviewed family members had favorable opinions about the GT, AP, and Pre-AP programs in ACISD. They considered advanced courses beneficial for children but recognized there were challenges and wanted the pros and cons of the courses to be explained. Parents expressed some concerns such as children being “kicked out” of classes or educators pushing them too much once they were in the advanced courses. All parents requested encouragement by educators for the individual student. One parent phrased this support as each
student’s “needing a hero.” The interviewed parents recognized the kind of thinking, discussion, and engagement that occurred in GT and AP classes as well as the dedication and perseverance needed by both parent and child for a student to be successful in an AP environment.

All parents reported that they reviewed course options with their students and participated in making decisions regarding college-going coursework. This collaboration worked for the majority of parents, but one child figured out how to make changes to his schedule after the mother had signed it. Parents said that they worked to make sure their children were prepared for rigorous courses. Reasons for taking advanced classes that were cited by parents varied, but most fell into two categories: either their students wanted to be more engaged, or they were preparing for life after high school. All parents of children in advanced courses said their students were bored in lower grades. The families that elected advanced courses chose, and continued to choose, these courses to engage their children. They either believed in the quality of the programs presented by ACISD or chose not to share their reservations. Any critical stories that were shared had taken place in other districts. Parents who were interviewed said they had been preparing their children to attend college for all of their lives. Parents perceived that AP courses will help the students prepare for college level work while they are still in high school. Advanced courses were stepping stones to opportunities in college and career. Some parents had taken advanced courses themselves and encouraged children to take them as well. Others had not taken advanced courses but wanted the students to take a different educational route from the one they had experienced.

The reasons parents gave for their children’s not signing up for advanced classes were that the student did not want the challenge or to study the particular course content in detail, or that the child struggled in a specific subject. Some students did not take the AP or Pre-AP
courses because they were not invited. When students were not pushing themselves nor being pushed by others, parents tended to assume, they would not elect to work harder in advanced courses. Parents whose children were involved in AP tended to be proud of them and their accomplishments, although it was also true that some of the interviewed parents were proud that their children were on track to graduate from high school.

Parents offered a variety of reasons for the course choices their children had made in high school. If students did not want to take more challenging courses, parents did not force them to do so. They explained that students would not fully participate if not confident about their ability and readiness for the class. Parents wanted to make sure the students were successful in the current level of coursework before moving them to a higher level. On the other hand, some parents said students had not been pushed to take more rigorous courses by school personnel or parents. One reason given was that advanced academics offerings are not always presented to students and parents. Families wanted counselors to be more proactive and engaged with the parents so informed choices could be made.

Parents perceived that some children had learning styles that did not fit the typical AP style of read, lecture, take notes, and test. If the student’s learning style did not match this process and the educator were inflexible, the student would be likely to leave the advanced course. Parents perceived that some students learned better by doing. Test anxiety was also cited by parents as a barrier to student success.

Changes in home environments or personal barriers such as chronic illness were cited by some parents as sometimes prohibiting students who might have been involved under other circumstances from taking advanced classes. Sustained stress or finding the time needed to complete advanced work while balancing other responsibilities was perceived by some parents as
a struggle for some students. Parents wanted to remind educators that AP students were still children. They worried that overly demanding courses and educators might sour children’s school experience. Parents perceived that students in AP often did not have time for anything else. On the other hand, parents of AP and GT students considered the behavior and lack of student motivation in the general education classes as barriers to their children’s learning in these settings.

Parents relied on the other parents and the community to help them with their children and these decisions. The parents viewed themselves and their children as having support systems. Family members such as grandparents, aunts, and older siblings played a role in that support system. Church communities and fellow school parents often collaborated to support their children as they tackled challenging courses, and they asked for school personnel join the support systems that they had already established. Parents wanted their children to be encouraged and wanted to know how to help them be successful. Several of the parents mentioned going back to school and their children’s watching them work through the process. Having students excited about learning was important to the parents.

Most of the interviewed parents understood a great deal about AP courses. They knew that they were fast-paced, the ceiling was lifted, and children were challenged. Parents agreed that a necessary component of advanced academics participation was the student’s willingness to do the work, and they did not mind if their children struggled as long as they also received appropriate support and encouragement from educators. Families understood that struggle was necessary for growth.
Summary of Findings for Question 3

How do the perspectives of students and family members align with one another? In the presentation of answers to Question 3, ways that the students and parents align are presented first, including the purpose of taking advanced academics courses, concerns about inclusion or lack of inclusion, and how students can be successful in rigorous courses. Then ways that the students and parents do not align such as importance of learning styles, the level of commitment required, and why students are or are not in advanced courses are presented next.

How children and parents were similar in perspectives. The student and parent group perspectives aligned in several ways. All four groups discussed the differences between the advanced academics courses and general education, what students must be able to do to be successful academically, the impact of students’ educations on their future goals, and the positive influence of family support.

All study participants shared that they considered the academic programs in ACISD to be of high quality. Parents of GT, AP, and general education students and their children expressed positive perspectives about the overall educational experience. The two students who intended to participate in advanced academics next school year for the first time and their parents were not dissatisfied with the current course selections and program delivery; however, they did seek additional academic challenge. These parents wanted to continue challenging their children, and the children embraced the challenge as long as it was not overwhelming. All agreed that the GT and AP programs were demanding for the most part.

Students and parents also agreed that an important purpose of courses taken in high school, especially the advanced academics courses, was to prepare the children for college and career eventualities. Parents expressed in different ways that they had been preparing their
children for college all of the children’s lives. Perceptions of what exactly was needed for post high school success varied somewhat among the participants. Two general education students and one of their parents expressed a belief that advanced academics courses were not a necessary factor in successful college completion. Most participants saw these courses as a cornerstone for later academic success.

Another common concern of some students and parents was the nebulous pathway for entering advanced academics courses if students were not in GT. Parents felt that appropriate information about access to advanced courses was not available and counselors were not proactive in providing it. Several parents had interacted with counselors, but families lamented that they always had to seek information and sometimes did not know what or whom to ask. The students shared similar perceptions when they characterized counselors as “changers of schedules.” Some students also observed that some African American students took Pre-AP courses but did not continue in AP courses, so the pathway might not be clearly marked. Parents and students agreed that preparation for rigorous coursework was important but differed on whether Pre-AP accomplished that role. Parents thought that if a child took Pre-AP courses, he or she would be ready for AP. General education students agreed with the parents, but AP students thought that Pre-AP did not adequately prepare students for the challenges of AP.

Last, the parents and the students from all groups discussed willingness to work hard and reliance on the support of community as important factors in academic success. The definition of community differed for each group, but the need for support was acknowledged by every participant. The community for parents was often the church, other parents, or extended family. For students, the community included mostly peers and siblings in their support systems, but some also experienced support from church and extended family.
How children and parents differed in perspectives. The differences in alignment of responses by students and parents were sometimes startling, and other times, slight. For example, both groups wanted more support from counselors; parents almost demanded it while students wanted more but did not expect it.

Some of the responses from parents and students may have represented differences in perspective due to age or role. For example, several parents discussed the learning styles of the students as a potential barrier to inclusion or success in an advanced class. These parents seemed to see learning style such as being an introvert or having test anxiety as the source of a potential inequity. LaTisha’s mother mentioned that her daughter had taken several AP courses and AP tests and had yet to pass one of them, a result attributed to her test anxiety. The students, on the other hand, did not offer any mention of learning style barriers to their academic success.

Another difference was the parent emphasis on the point that their students were still children who should not be overwhelmed while the children continually talked about independence and autonomy as their goals.

There was a parent perception that their children in AP are overcommitted and had no free time, while AP students seem to think they are not doing something right if they had free time. This valuing of types of experience was one of the points on which the general education parents and the advanced academics parents tended to differ. Interacting with family and having ample time to do homework, chores, and family activities was a part of a typical day for all four general education students. The emphasis on time management and individual accomplishment valued by AP students was accepted and encouraged by their parents.

Another point on which student and parent views did not align was how students came to be included in advanced academics. Each student in AP or GT courses described an educator
who recognized they were performing above grade level in at least one academic area and facilitated their access to advanced courses. Parents had other memories. For the identified GT students, one parent recalled that a grandmother who had a masters in gifted education had shared her observations and recommendations when the child was at an early age. One AP parents said her son had self-identified as wanting to be with the more advanced students on his own. She perceived his entry into AP as his having been rescued.

AP students shared that they did not want to be part of general education classes because they were boring. Students not choosing AP, however, enjoyed the predictability and support of the general education courses. Parents of the children in general education believed these courses served their children well but thought AP courses were also good. The parents of GT and AP students supported the positive impact of AP courses in their children’s current and future lives.

Ultimately, students perceived that when students did not participate in advanced academics, either they did not want to work that hard or they could not do the work. Parents, on the other hand, thought that if students were able to take an advanced academics course and chose not to, they probably had not been asked. This difference suggests a difference in ability to advocate for opportunity. Students saw themselves as advocates for their futures. The students in GT or AP advocated for the challenging curriculum they thought they needed to reach their potentials. Students who had not chosen AP were self-advocates for high school graduation. Parents appeared not to see their children as self-advocates, instead representing them, at times, as introverts or as needing guidance. Differences about who was in the driver’s seat of students’ futures between students and parents were striking.

A final comparison: how individual children and parents align. As a researcher, I heard the voices of the students as they told their stories and of the parents as they shared their love and
concern about their children and their futures. What amazed me, when I heard the parents speak, was the matching of intonations and word choices to the children I had already interviewed. Children and their parents often used the same words, sentence structure, and convictions as they shared their perceptions. It became clear to me that these children carried the voices of their families with them.

Summary of Chapter 4

Four shared the findings of the study, guided by the data that were collected and the analysis planned to address research questions. This chapter first summarized data as sorted into themes and presented it separately for Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, and Group 4, the parent participants. Then how the parents and the children agree or disagree with each other as presented. The findings of each group were presented separately and then compared to one another. Last, a summary of findings for Research Questions 1, 2, and 3 were shared.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore, through case study that focused on native-born African American students and their families, how African American students in gifted and advanced academics programs built resiliency to stay in these programs and what prevented other African American students from doing so. The role and presence of justice for African American students in gifted and advanced academics programs was determined in ACISD.

Research Questions

The questions that guided the study were the following:

1. What were the perspectives of native-born African American participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?

2. What were the perspectives of native-born African American family members of participants and non-participants in AP programs about gifted and advanced academics programs?

3. How did the perspectives of students and family members align with one another?

This study was motivated by inequities of enrollment in gifted and advanced academics by ethnicity in the school district (ACISD) in which all study participants were enrolled. As shared in Table 1, African American students in ACISD comprised 12.9% of the student enrollment using TEA data, yet 6.23% were identified as gifted. The data showed a gap greater than 6% between participation of African American students in gifted courses and the percentage of African Americans in the district’s overall population, while the other subgroups identified by race/ethnicity either more closely matched the demographics of the district or were over-identified in the gifted program. These background statistics confirm inequities that are not
unique to ACISD. The statistics for African American participation in AP courses of ACISD were similar to those for gifted.

These statistics reveal an issue of justice for African American students that informed the method for this study of the experiences of a population that presented some challenges of access. Data were collected from a student and family questionnaire, interviews, a focus group, and research memos. Participants were 12 African American high school students and seven of their parents. The analysis of the data resulted in a multiple case study, which was searched systematically for themes that might suggest common experiences of students regarding inclusion in gifted and advanced academics courses and how they might relate to the community of native-born African American students in the district in which the study was conducted.

Learning the perspectives of students and their parents was viewed as an important step toward ensuring the equitable inclusion and success of native-born African American students in gifted and advanced academics, consistent with a district goal. Success in realizing the goal required equity in the district’s inclusion of native-born African American students in gifted and advanced academics services, acceptance of those services by the students and in the families, and retention of the students in the programs for which they were qualified.

Conclusions

The results of the study are presented in Chapter 4 both in summary form by theme for students and for parents and as they pertained to the research questions. Students shared in their interviews a consistent message that they valued their educations. They celebrated the opportunities provided for them to learn but also asked for improvements. Parents shared that education, especially a college education, had always been a goal for their children, and they
requested a partnership with the schools to facilitate that goal. The stories of children and parents in tandem represented powerful voices from the African American community.

The sections that follow state conclusions arising from the findings of the study that have implications for justice to the population of interest as it pertains to the criteria for success listed above. Two frameworks guided the presentation of the conclusions. First, the parallel and not overlapping milestones of the Civil Rights Movement and gifted education provided an overarching backdrop for conclusions drawn from the study. Beginning with events since the Civil War up to the Obama administration, the quest for equity for African American gifted and advanced academics learners has not been realized. Nevertheless, Americans are closer than ever to the dialogue that might lead to equity. The model of Oakes’ Seven Critical Conditions for Equity, adapted by Oseguera (2013), was a second framework used to present the conclusions of this study. Oakes’ equity model harkens Rawls (1971), other historical origins of justice (Pomerleau, 2015), and researchers of gifted African American equity (Davis, 2010; Ford, 2010b; Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Hopkins & Garrett, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler, 2009; Worrell, 2007) in an educational setting. Oakes’ model has three focuses, the first of which was on high quality academic instruction that included rigorous curriculum, qualified teachers, and safe and adequate school facilities. Focus two required a school-based commitment to college access that included a college-going culture and intensive academic and social support in order to provide equity for students. The third focus of the Seven Critical Conditions for Equity was a shared responsibility for college access and choices that included opportunities to develop a multicultural college-going identity and family-neighborhood-school connections (Oseguera, 2013).
Why are the statistics presented at the beginning of this chapter still inequitable? Some conclusions for the study directly address the reasons. This section lists the study conclusions in the order of cogency and importance perceived by the researcher on the basis of the data collected and the themes that arose from the analysis.

**Gifted Program Access and Implementation**

Since the requirements for student entry into the gifted program at ACISD differed from the more inclusive entry practices of the AP program, conclusions regarding access to these two programs are presented separately. The study found that an equitable district philosophy for inclusion of students in the gifted program did not necessarily result in equitable access. According to the data, some students were never considered for gifted program even when they were long-time students in ACISD. When an equitable policy fails to produce the desired result, one must question whether implementation was adequate or fair. How was ACISD following its policy?

Each of the identified gifted students who participated in the study vividly remembered when someone in elementary school saw something—potential or ability to read or do math well above grade level—and recommended that student for gifted services. An adult saw potential. If an educator did not recommend a child, district processes allowed for other means of referral; however, the nomination of a student by him or herself, a peer, a family member, or a community member did not occur in the record of this study. Student and adult participants in the study were not aware of these options. While the GT students and their families participating in this study seemed to support the GT identification and service model philosophy of the district, which was intended to create opportunity for students, parents who did not have children in the gifted program did not know how the program worked, so they did not express agreement.
or disagreement with policy. The experiences of participants in the study suggested that the current referral system did not ensure regular evaluation of student eligibility for participation in gifted courses or regular participation if students were eligible.

Confusion in the gifted field in defining gifted education might be one reason educators did not identify and advocate for inclusion of African American learners in gifted programs. If definitions vary by teacher education program, local district, state agency, and national governing body, then confusion might contribute to issues of access for students. A problem with access might exist because the gifted field has failed to offer educators and other stakeholders a common, applicable definition of giftedness. The definitional issues were presented in the literature review with researchers in the gifted field such as Borland (2012); Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins, Siegle, Zhang, & Chen (2005); Carmen (2013); Dai & Chen (2013); McBee, McCoach, Peters, & Matthews (2012); NAGC (2010); Olszewski-Kubilius & Thomson (2010); Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach (2012); Renzulli (2012); Stephens & Karnes (2000); Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell (2011); and TEA (2014). Davis (2010), Ford (2011), Ford (2013), and VanTassel-Baska (2010) presented definitions based on cultural elements.

A second reason gifted African American students were not identified and receiving services might center on the implementation of the policy set up for identification and inclusion. Working from a strengths-based definition of giftedness, Ford (2011) noted that strengths of gifted African American student often became liabilities in the classroom. These differences could unjustly prohibit students from being included in gifted programs. For example, an African American learner may have strengths associated with spirituality, movement, affect, and communalism. These characteristics might be a negative influence in a testing environment where students were expected to be serious, physically still, competition-driven, and
independent. Ford (2011) and Ford (2013) reminded educators that culture matters at all times, during testing and learning and dynamic versus deficit thinking drives a strengths-based definition. Ford (2011) noted that three contemporary theories of giftedness from Renzulli, Sternberg, and Gardner contributed to “equitable and culturally responsive perspectives of giftedness.” (p. 75).

This study found that ACISD schools and teachers did not necessarily consistently implement the gifted programs as designed. Franklin talked about programs and grouping of students being changed at his campus while other campuses followed the district program design. For educators to make independent decisions about the education of students without considering the long-range implications for the students jeopardizes justice. As outlined in the adapted model of Oakes’ Seven Critical Conditions for Equity, high quality academic instruction that included rigorous academic curriculum providing “skills, knowledge, and credits to enter and succeed in college” must have been delivered by qualified teachers to create a condition of equity for students (Oseguera, 2013). If one student received the appropriate curriculum from appropriately credentialed GT and/or AP teachers and another did not, but both progressed to the same college-level class the following year, the system had set the unprepared student up for failure. The students did not have an equitable experience and consequently would not have had the same opportunity for future success. Because national, state, and local policy makers believe they have created equity guidelines, they assume that equity exists. However, if the implementation of the equitable policy is not supported by funds, personnel, training, and curriculum delivery, the intended equity policies fail.

The problem of the disconnect between the representation of African American students among gifted learners and the practices that would allow their equitable inclusion exists
nationally, as well as in ACISD. For a program to be equitable, it must provide opportunities to “develop a multicultural college-going identity that provides confidence and skills without asking students to sacrifice who they are” (Oseguera, 2013) and qualified teachers who “engage students in intellectually challenging work and bridge home cultures with school requirements” (Oseguera, 2013).

AP Program Access and Implementation

While ACISD offered an open-access policy for Pre-AP and AP courses, some prepared students had not been provided an opportunity to participate in Pre-AP or AP classes. However, parents of Pre-AP and AP students seemed to have clearer understandings of the Pre-AP and AP opportunities than they did of the GT program. When parents were presented three scenarios of advanced academics services (Appendix C), each parent chose the model represented by ACISD. The district program, modeled after the College Board open access policy for AP courses, allowed any student who was willing to work, was prepared, and had an interest in the subject to take Pre-AP or AP courses. In spite of this, African American students were not enrolled in advanced courses at a rate comparable to students from other ethnic groups. The process that enabled eligible African American students’ entry into Pre-AP or AP courses was viewed as happenstance by the affected participants. Also, despite the open access policy of the district, parents of students in general education said they and their children were not offered Pre-AP or AP courses although some of the students reported that they saw Pre-AP and AP on the course selection sheets during registration. Some of these students may have met the criteria of interested, prepared, and willing to complete the coursework as established by ACISD. Equitable inclusion was an intent of the program design, but the result was inequitable, suggesting again that implementation was not adequate. Although the process for gaining access
to GT and AP/Pre-AP were somewhat different, neither program’s recruitment and enrollment procedures led to equitable results.

ACISD schools and teachers did not consistently implement Pre-AP or AP programs as designed. Davis (2010) called attention to the barrier of low expectations that many African Americans face. Equitable access to Pre-AP and AP courses can occur only if students have background experiences that would enable them to manage rigorous curriculum. If one student received the appropriate curriculum in one Pre-AP class and another student in a different Pre-AP did not, but both enrolled in the same AP class the following year, the system had set the unprepared student up for failure. The students did not have an equitable experience and consequently would not have the same opportunity for future success. Aubrey had this experience with her AP World history course. She had taken Pre-AP World Geography the previous year, but she was overwhelmed and unprepared when she entered her first AP class. Sending student into rigorous courses without the appropriate tools is inequitable. Teachers must bridge home and school cultures and provide intensive academic and social supports for schools to be equitable environments (Oseguera, 2013). Since the national and state statistics mirror those of ACISD, this inequity is of national proportion.

Student Network Support

Students who enter gifted and advanced academics programs need support to persist successfully in them. Participants in this study who did persist found support through educators, communities, peers, and families. For example, students in Group 1 found support from teachers and fellow gifted students. Raymond attended tutoring weekly, and Aubrey applied what she learned in her AP class and through peer support in other Pre-AP classes. Adults who were attentive to the psychosocial needs of these learners helped to ensure their academic success.
Leonard’s mother modeled the positive self-talk that he would need to thwart self-doubts about his choosing to be academically focused. However, not all adults were supportive. Renae had experiences with educators and family members who detracted or confused her sense of self. Lack of attention to the psychosocial elements of African American students (Olszewski-Kublius and Clarenbach, 2012) had possibly contributed to at least some students’ experiencing more stress than may have been necessary, feeling out of their element, and frequently feeling behind or inferior. Both LaTisha and her mother, for example, often talked about the daughter’s test anxiety, which led to feelings of inadequacy as she navigated AP coursework. Michael repeatedly talked about not receiving adequate support with homework or the independent learning he encountered in this first year in AP courses. Olszewski-Kublius and Clarenbach (2012) credited psychosocially developing school cultures that valued individual differences with improving inclusion of historically underrepresented populations in gifted programs. In both Olszewski-Kublius and Clarenbach (2012) and this study, students stayed in AP because of the encouragement of teachers and peers and a belief that they could be successful. African American ACISD students reported that how teachers made them feel determined their motivation to excel. An untenable environment existed if African American students did not find support for their continued participation in advanced courses. Oseguera (2013) stated that the critical condition for equity is school-based commitment to college access which included formalized, intensive, and social supports that “enable students to negotiate the academic pipeline.” Her research supported that students at the national, state, and local levels did not consistently receive the purposeful support associated with success.

Students in the current study shared that they needed access to a peer network to sustain participation in gifted and advanced academics courses. For the GT students, the network was
established by inclusion in the gifted program. If students were not included in the gifted program, they were left to their own ingenuity to garner peer support. Aubrey showed such ingenuity by guiding and supporting underclassmen. She thought that hearing encouragement from AP students earlier in the process would have had a powerful impact on student decision-making about course selection. She recalled, “Nobody really encouraged it for me except for the teachers. I’m not complaining, but…it’s different coming from a student because we’re all in this together.” A district and school culture that failed to provide support from teachers and peers perpetuated inequitable access for African American students.

Pre-AP as Preparation for AP

As suggested by a lack of equitable implementation of the advanced academics program design, Pre-AP did not prepare all African American students for AP. Shonda, Michael, and Raymond were prepared for their AP classes in their Pre-AP experiences; the lack of preparation in Pre-AP courses lead to Ashley’s inability to navigate and remain in college-going courses. She shared a story of her unsuccessful transition from ninth grade Pre-AP to AP in tenth grade. Renae, Leonard, and LaTisha discussed struggles as they transitioned from Pre-AP to AP in the subject areas where they were not identified as gifted like math and social studies. Students in the study specifically noticed that many African American students took Pre-AP courses but did not go on to AP. This lack of preparation contributed to a culture of fear of failure, avoidance of stress or hard work, and not feeling prepared for future challenges. Participants in the current study reported this struggle. All types of students (Hertzberg-Davis and Callahan, 2008), students from urban schools (Hallet and Venegas, 2011), and African American students (Ford, 2011) often left AP because they were not prepared for the fast-pace and amount of high-level work and could not navigate this raw territory. In retrospect, one student (Aubrey) understood
that her inability to ask questions and seek support was why she dropped her first AP class. She later learned to ask for the added support she needed. Students who did not know how to use resources might not be successful. Van Tassel-Baska (2010) noted that one of the hallmarks of a successful advanced academics program for historically underrepresented, urban populations was “comprehensive articulated offerings across the span of K–12.” African American learners do not have equitable access to advanced courses if they are not adequately prepared by the courses that are by design intended to prepare students for AP. A condition for equity is a shared responsibility for college access, and the reality is that often the responsibility is solely on the student. The system expects the student to change to fit the college-going system that Pre-AP and AP offer without appropriate support, and the cost of participation is often too great for high school students. They must give up their culture to participate, and some are unwilling. Instead, educators should meet the students where they are and bring them to college readiness as partners. Using only the “Here it is; come and get it” approach, without the appropriate support for accessing rigorous curriculum, will not provide the needed confidence and skills for inclusion in the culturally foreign territory of college.

Two-way Communication

All interviewed parents reported regular interaction with their children regarding education. The families in the study performed the duties that researchers (Abel, 2012; Brandon, 2007; Greene, 2013) showed supported students’ educational pursuits such as expecting children to take responsibility for learning, homework, and grades; maintaining high expectations; and sharing stories about struggling and resiliency. In spite of this, parents indicated that a disconnect between school and home inhibited families from fully supporting their children as they desired. Because communication flowed from home to school and was controlled by the school, parents
did not have all of the information they needed, when they needed it, to carry out their duties. At times parents did not possess insider knowledge about how school worked and this lack of information hindered their ability to adequately support their children. Understanding what AP and general education courses were like and the level of preparation required for success could come only from an insider view. The parents expected counselors to provide this information, and often they did not.

Though parents had a support system, they wanted to improve them and were looking for partners. Researchers (Abel, 2012; Conley, 2005, 2010; Epstein, 1995; Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008) found that families had a significant impact on educational decisions made for their children in middle school and high school, so providing information to help them adequately guide their children was needed. Parents relied on other parents and community to help them. Gerson (2010) and Ford (2011) called these supporting community members fictive kin or family that you choose. Older siblings also played a role in that support system. Parents wanted their children to be encouraged and wanted to know who in their communities could help their children be successful.

Families made academic choices based on the information they had. When they did not know programs existed or how they worked (GT), they could not advocate for their children. Hertzog and Bennett (2004) said that families made choices to address their children’s needs through their individual family experiences and cultures, even when they did not know what that support looked like (VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Swanson, Quek, & Chandler, 2009). When parents did not have first-hand knowledge of Pre-AP or AP courses, they could not navigate inclusion or know how to support their children when the challenges threatened to overwhelm them. They often took what the child and the school offered as choices at face value. Parents who had not
attended college did not know how the college system worked. For example, one parent in this study stated that the child was “going to get into any college he wants to” without college preparatory courses.

For an equitable educational system to emerge, a partnership among the family, community, and school must be established (Oseguera, 2013). Although the parents in the study communicated appropriate expectations to their children, parents did not always have the information they needed to help their children make well-informed decisions. Disenfranchised families might not be comfortable asking schools for information. But if the families did ask for information, Hong (2012) noted that the location of the collaboration often impacted its outcome. Since white, middle class norms might dictate the culture of the school, “power relations are often undisturbed and unexamined” (p. 125). Until the educational community is willing to consider its role in inequity with communication patterns, it will likely continue, and families will be at the mercy of the school system.

Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy and self-efficacy were distinguishing characteristics for the GT and AP students. Helping students enter and remain in challenging courses centered on the teacher’s support and understanding of what the child needed to build the resiliency to maintain the sustained efforts needed for success in rigorous courses. A new understanding and articulation the researcher garnered from this study was how little families had considered the need for self-efficacy or self-assertion to ensure success in rigorous classes. Students seemed to realize that they needed this skill. Parents did not talk about or seem to recognize the need to believe in one’s ability as a prerequisite for taking and staying in rigorous courses. Maybe when parents said they wanted educators to remember that these students were still children, they intended to remind
educators that these students were not self-advocates. They were children, sometimes shy and introverted children. The parents did not expect them to have this self-efficacy skill, but experiences of successful students in advanced programs suggested that educators did expect this of students. When students did not have this quality, they often attributed it to lack of preparation, yet no one deliberately taught this skill. In the study, parent participants shared that the individual personalities of the children influenced their educational experiences and choice. Data suggested being an introvert thwarted self-advocacy; being outgoing and independent supported academic pursuits of students. Earlier researchers (Griffin, 2012; Howard & Reynolds, 2009) have also recognized that teaching advocacy contributed to the probability of African American families’ voices being heard.

Each group of parents and their children was interested in being able to say, “I broke the cycle.” Of the three parents in the group of seven who were college graduates, two had graduated recently. They were trying to break the cycle for themselves, and the parents wanted to help their children do the same thing. Those recent graduates and the masters-level student wanted their children to get a degree earlier, more easily, and differently from the way they had done it. For most parents breaking the cycle meant their child was going to college, and for one it meant graduating from high school. The knowledge base of families contributed to the support they were able to provide for their children. Families understood advanced classes and opportunities generally; however, they often did not understand specific steps to take to support their children in accessing and navigating GT, Pre-AP or AP courses. They did not know the ramifications of not taking advanced courses for the long-range educational plans of their children. Consequently, they were hindered in being able to fully advocate for their children.
Individual Considerations

Individual considerations impacted equitable access for African American learners and must be considered by all stakeholders. Participants in this study sometimes suggested that how educators saw individual characteristics such as learning style, family values, and cultural capital impacted the quality of their inclusion of African American students in gifted and advanced academics courses. Researchers (Ford, 2011; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Henfield, 2012) have supported the concern that parents expressed regarding African American learners whose learning style did not fit the majority or expected style. In the current study, parents suggested that a mismatch between learning style and teaching style with an inflexible teacher might have excluded some students from attempting AP or might have discouraged them from staying once enrolled. This kind of consideration is not currently part of the discussion of student inclusion in programs of the ACISD, yet equitable conditions require wholehearted support of a multi-cultural college-going student identity that provides confidence and skills (Oseguera, 2013) without robbing children of their family culture. Qualified teachers who bridge the home and school world could enhance equitable access for African American learners. In the A Nation Deceived follow up study entitled, A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America’s Brightest Students, Assouline, Colangelo, and VanTassel-Baska (2015) underscored that “educational equity does not mean educational sameness; rather, equity respects individual differences in readiness to learn and recognizes the value of each student” (p. 3). Culture, readiness, and individual differences permeated classrooms of students in this study and all classrooms. Homogeneous classrooms did not exist, and educators and families must work together for students to maximize learning without abdicating either world. Frey (2015)
estimated that by 2040, a racial minority will not exist in the U.S., so the focus on diversity of learners in schools will be an ongoing focus.

General Education

The same conditions that are critical for equity for college access must become guidelines for the general education classroom. A disparity in the realized academic potential of African American students resulted in these students’ disproportional placement in general education. Students in the study described a lack of urgency and preparation in a general education classrooms resulting in a waste of time, ability, and preparation for students. Since the majority of African American students take general education classes, the issue of equity requires assuring that general classes prepare students for postsecondary education and productive careers.

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations for practices in AC ISD might improve participation of African American students in gifted, Pre-AP, and AP courses. Greene (2013) noted that educators and families need to balance their “values and priorities” with one another (p. 26). In addition to what was said, some things were not said. Parents were not critical of the district. Possibly they were pleased with the overall services, but they may also have been reluctant to criticize since their children attended schools in this district. Howard and Reynolds (2008) reminded educators that parents are becoming more savvy consumers, and schools need to interact with them in mutually productive ways.

Program Access

A philosophy of equity appeared to drive identification and inclusion of students in district GT and advanced academic program design, but in practice exclusion existed. Means beyond supportive policy must be provided for inclusion of African American learners. The data
suggested that opportunities were missed because people were not informed. Although the GT identification process might be initiated by several individuals, the teacher was almost always the one who recommended a child for screening for gifted services. Families, school personnel, community members, and students must be provided information regarding the nomination and inclusion practices for gifted and advanced academics courses, and educators must evaluate their identification practices for inclusion. In order to ensure inclusion, training should occur to inform educators and parents to identify strengths of African American learners. Training that would help adults recognize characteristics as dynamic thinking (He’s learned poor work habits) versus deficit thinking (He’s lazy) would help support inclusion in rigorous courses (Ford, 2013).

Program Implementation

The district needed to ensure that the service design and curriculum were delivered as outlined by the district. Consistent implementation of a well-designed program would increase access. For example, GT students warned against mixing Pre-AP and GT courses as it diluted the preparation for AP courses. They were knowledgeable about the nomination and screening protocols and resulting GT services and understood the differences between GT and Pre-AP courses. The differences participants described in preparation for rigor, attitude about completing the work, and a sense of disconnect between the demeanor of the GT and Pre-AP student impacted the culture of the classroom. The implementation of curriculum design was a justice issue with psycho-social repercussions. If one student had been trained differently in GT than another student in Pre-AP, yet they were later placed in the same class, the differently prepared student would likely struggle and have an undeserved, negative educational experience. Often this experience would lead to low expectations. African American children are often the subjects of low expectations (Davis, 2010), and a cycle of low expectations is perpetuated when children
are not properly prepared. The teachers must deliver prescribed curriculum equitably for GT, Pre-AP, and AP courses so students are adequately prepared for the vertical progression of coursework. The inequity of placing unprepared students in rigorous courses resulted in eventual exclusion when they could not sustain performance.

Student Network Support

Professional development would give educators the tools to support gifted, Pre-AP and AP students psychosocially, potentially providing students with psychosocial support for learning in rigorous classrooms. Helping students with transitions, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, and differentiation, would help to address the social and emotional needs of gifted and advanced African American learners. Some examples of such educator training might include helping African American students navigate the collective versus the individual perspective in school and home communities and seeing cultural strengths of African American gifted and advanced academics learners instead of classifying them as deficits (Ford, 2013). These professional development efforts should be targeted to indentify and sustain equitable inclusion of African American learners in rigorous programs.

Fostering a peer support system of ambassadors or peer mentoring would serve a similar purpose. Matching eighth graders with tenth graders in the spring of the school year, and providing deliberate interactions as they returned to school the following year, would promote a peer mentoring pipeline of support. Creating a group of African American high school students who provide emotional and course content support for the campus as a whole would allow for a peer network. Also, establishing a network with African American college students would provide a connection for both former and current college-going students. College students, upper classmen as a student ambassador program, and educators in mentoring roles in addition to
classroom teachers and counselors could answer a cry for help. The equitable school system strives to “address the needs of each individual child” (Singleton & Linton, 2006), and students and parents in the study said they needed mentors and support for their children.

Pre-AP as Preparation for AP

The preparation provided by Pre-AP courses should be more vertically aligned and deliberately implemented as preparation for AP. Participant reports indicated need for the district to review practices, align curriculum, and incorporate psycho-social elements into the delivery expectations. Educators should eliminate “down time” during class and have students work on manageable, multi-part tasks and projects in preparation for AP independence and autonomy. If these supports are not included for African American learners, the educational system is effectively excluding students from developing the potential for advanced academic success.

Kaplan (2011) addressed the importance of deliberately teaching transition skills to help students acclimate to more rigorous academic performances. Implement a plan to teach students how to use resources and what to do in various scenarios such as showing up for tutoring and finding 25 other students in the room. In addition, district and campus leaders could track the students who took Pre-AP courses but did not continue onto AP courses and put a plan in place to support their choosing AP courses where appropriate. If capable and prepared students were not choosing to take Pre-AP or AP, educators could document rationale for the students’ permanent folders. ACISD had situations where challenging classes like GT and Pre-AP were not being delivered effectively. If qualified students did not enroll, a plan to overcome the consequent inequity was needed. Davis (2010) underscored that the low retention rate of African American students in advanced classes “speaks to their discomfort level and the need for schools to examine better approaches to ensuring that students’ intellectual and social and emotional
needs are appropriately met” (p. 18). The lack of justice in meeting African American students
cognitive and emotional needs by under-preparing them for future challenges must be addressed.

Information for Families

If the parents must rely on an educator to inform them of all high school course choices, a
foolproof method of sharing gifted and advanced academic course information must be provided.
As long as schools continue to hold the reins of power through information, a truly equitable
system will continue to elude African American students in gifted and advanced academics.
Information that parents could take home and use with the child in decision-making was needed,
preferably with supportive media such as a DVD and online modules. Face to face meetings, if
held, should be in the evenings and on weekends. Refining who was responsible for providing
which information was important as a recurring message from this study was that counselors
were not able to be effective sources of information.

In addition to sharing GT, Pre-AP, and AP information, the district needs to create a
system for providing college information and encouragement for African American students and
parents. Because many African American students were first generation college students,
families often did not have college knowledge to support their children’s decision-making. In the
study, some parents had personal experience with college, but only one had the typical four-year
bachelor degree experience. A just system would provide information in a way that families were
comfortable accessing it.

Two-way Communication

ACISD should take the lead in establishing mutual partnerships with families that
involved parental input and showed respect for the family and its knowledge and culture. Parents
perceived that educators were passive outside their normal roles and wanted counselors and
teachers to be proactive and engaged with the parent so informed choices could be made. ACISD parents wanted to be partners with schools, but some were cautious with their trust. Some are waiting for the school to come to them. Greene (2013) and Porter (2008) determined that how the parents supported schools often depended on the school’s approach to the family. A reactive model, where parents were asked to respond to and implement policies only initiated by the school, did not facilitate collaboration (Cooper, 2009; Greene, 2013). Parents wanted permanent and ongoing information regarding course choices, college, and career information. They wanted this information not only when signing up for classes in the spring, but they wanted and needed the information for ongoing goal setting and planning for college and career. Options such as DVD, online modules, and meetings in the evenings and on weekends were requested. Student and parent ambassadors could be available to talk to students and parents.

To improve the equity of access for African American learners, the communication system must be more student and family centered. Parents participating in this study valued their children and their education. It was clear that families who were not participating in AP courses did not have anyone to answer questions or advocate for their child regarding college-going courses. There was a lack of career guidance in school and the home.

Self-Advocacy

Development of self-efficacy and self-advocacy should be deliberately taught and nurtured in Pre-AP and AP course. A careful structuring of the first portion of an AP course might provide the needed transition for students. Setting up rigorous expectations while providing tools for success and psychosocial awareness and support might facilitate a transition for underprepared students. This includes positive self talk, learning how to ask questions and seek support, and mentoring by fellow and older students. Students needed support in
acclimating to a more rigorous environment, as if advanced academics were a third culture to
navigate: culture of origin, culture of mainstream schools, and now culture of gifted and
advanced academics courses.

Three parents of students not participating in GT, Pre-A or AP courses said their children were introverts or did not advocate for themselves. Is it possible that these students might have chosen advanced courses if someone had recognized their introverted personalities and directly approached them? What does it mean when a teacher said a child is a “good kid”: quiet, submissive, compliant? Most of the GT or AP students interviewed were outgoing and did advocate for themselves. What were we doing as a district if a student did not know how to self-advocate? One recommendation is that through a structured program such as advisory, educators teach students to advocate for themselves, ask questions, persevere when it seems like someone who is supposed to help them is not. Skills of advocacy should also be taught in Pre-AP, AP, and GT courses so students can build resiliency and know how to help themselves as they face challenge.

Families and students had a different understanding about the need for self-efficacy to ensure success in rigorous classes. Students employed positive self-talk and sought out support when they needed it. Parents did not automatically include this skill when discussing success in school and college.

Individual Considerations

The district must establish practice that supports students without mainstream learning styles, family values, and cultural capital opting into AP. A plan should make allowances for and teach coping strategies for students who exhibited test anxiety, lived with chronic illness, or have chaotic home lives that might challenge success in an advanced class. A focus on
inclusionary practices must become part of the culture of ACISD to eradicate the unjust lack of inclusion of African Americans in gifted and advanced academics.

General Education

The general education classroom must value and focus student futures by delivering engaging lessons that utilize all instructional time and prepare students for college, technical school, or the work force. Implementation of policies that value the individual and adhere to district goals to fully develop the potential of every student must be upheld.

These recommendations might support the efforts of schools and families in providing an equitable culture for African American students in gifted and advanced academics.

Implications for Further Research

This study holds a unique place in the literature concerning the question of justice in gifted education, education of African American learners, and parental roles in the education of their children. The voices of parents and children in tandem are rarely represented in studies regarding gifted and advanced academics. This study was most like the work of Van-Tassel Baska’s with urban schools, Davis’s with parents’ concerns for gifted learners, and Ford’s with gifted African American learners. The voices and roles of African American communities and families added clarity to areas of implementation not justly administered to assure gifted and advanced academics student access and sustained success. The most notable contribution this study provided was that although stakeholders might have thought the right policies and procedures were in place, parents and children said they were not always effective. The study identified gaps existed due to model policies not actually happening in practice. Other studies had identified inequity in gifted and advanced academics education for African American learners, but most did not include the voices of the students and their families together. This
study could be linked to literature outside the gifted field as it concerned equity, civil rights, parent involvement, and college access.

Some issues emerged from the study that are shared here as possible future research topics.

First, students indicated wasted resources of time, ability, and preparation for students in general education classrooms. The idea of working bell-to-bell and using every educational minute was missing from their descriptions. Since the majority of African American students take general education classes, the issue of equity involves the right to an education that prepares the student for college and/or career. Which changes might occur in a general education classroom to engage and prepare students of rigorous educational performance?

Although the students talked about intelligence or higher intellectual practices, they did not talk about these as ingredients for success. References to higher intellectual practices were more a means of distinguishing among types of courses than requirements for learning that are of ultimate consequence. One student actually said you don’t need to be that smart to succeed in AP courses. Just do the work. However, intelligence void of hard work and an appropriate curriculum would not yield favorable results either. Gifted African American students in the study had been part of GT programs designed to maximize their learning. They shared that some GT classes they took in the required sequence before their AP courses were easy. Students earned good grades without much effort so they learned not to work hard and to procrastinate. What might be the appropriate balance of challenge, natural talent, and work ethic to maximize the abilities of gifted learners? How does a school system contribute to appropriate cognitive growth?
Pre-AP courses were perceived by the students as focused but limited. Basically, African American students were not challenged in most general education or Pre-AP courses in the sense that challenge requires engagement with multi-step, complex thinking and processes. Pre-AP courses were more college-preparatory than the general education curriculum, but the academic “push” really only happened in AP. In the search for a just opportunity for African American learners, not preparing students for the rigors of AP and then expecting them to perform at a rigorous level without proper preparation is setting students up for failure.

How might African American students perform differently in an AP class if taught Pre-AP strategies consistently in vertically aligned courses as compared to students who were not taught those strategies?

Advanced students expressed concerns about general education classrooms. In addition to the unchallenging curriculum, AP and GT students seemed to be concerned about the behavior of students in the general education classes: talking during class and acting disrespectfully toward the teacher. Once students had successfully participated in advanced academics, they did not want to return to general education classes. Those who had participated only in general education courses did not realize a different choice existed and did not express disappointment in the classes they took. Students who had experienced AP generally wanted to surround themselves with like-minded, serious students. Which elements from an advanced academics setting could make a general education classroom more compelling?

Including the perspectives of advanced academics education from the African American Community or GT or AP students who dropped out of advanced programs would add to the existing literature. This group of participants is not currently represented in this study.
Hindsight

Looking back on this study, the researcher acknowledges some things could have been done better. First, the proposed IRB contact procedures should have included ways to contact students in addition to flyers and referrals. Waiting too long for participants to respond to messages and referrals was the biggest mistake made. The researcher waited for students to bring back permission forms instead of giving them deadlines and looking for other participants. Finding participants who were not only willing to be interviewed three times but also bring forward a willing family member was harder than expected.

The researcher also relied too heavily for participant recruitment on area pastors and a district parent coordinator who was involved in the church community. After personal meetings with each and follow up phone calls and emails, the researcher did not find participants from these contacts. One parishioner did share an email through the parent coordinator, but when the researcher contacted her, she said she did not have time. Another mistake was not attending an African American educational community meeting. The researcher mistakenly believed that it would somehow taint data if she became involved with African American community advocacy while still collecting data. That decision ultimately shut her out of the avenue of area churches and pastors. The researcher perceived that they did not trust her as sincere in wanting to help the African American community and that she only wanted help from them. Also, the researcher should have held focus groups meetings closer in time to when the student interviews occurred. This might have resulted in a better response rate and more ease in scheduling. It should be noted that parents of students not interviewed were willing, but the researcher ran out of time.

Some of the recruiting challenges arose from the researcher’s not having daily contact with the students. For example, in one instance, at the recommendation of a teacher, the
researcher made three phone calls, four emails, two appointments, and four meetings with students about possible participation in the study, and none of them became involved. This cycle of recruitment was repeated until 12 participants that matched the three student groups’ profiles were reached. At one point too many students volunteered for Group 1, but no males were volunteering for Group 2. Some students wanted to participate, but their parents did not.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was that the participants who shared their stories were willing, voluntary participants. These students and families were willing to tell their stories, in a research setting, and all of them had success stories to tell. What was missing from these accounts was the student who was not successful, who dropped out of GT or AP classes and did not return, or who gave up on the educational system altogether. Also missing from this study was the voice of community members beyond the immediate families of the students.

Another limitation of the study was an inability to accurately describe the population from which the participants were drawn. Because of the way data were gathered using district demographics, as designed by TEA, numbers of students in the more specific population of native-born African Americans students could not be distinguished.

Limitations of the study also included the sample size employed. While some researchers considered 12 participants adequate to suggest saturation of information (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), others questioned whether this small number of participants truly represents a targeted population for research study (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). With a small number of participants, the ability to generalize the results would be limited. Another limitation was the convenience sample taken from one school district, especially the district in which the researcher resided and was employed. Another limitation was the researcher’s being a white, middle-aged,
middle class woman from a university who interviewed African American families in a native-born African American community.

Summary of Chapter 5

African American students and their parents are engaged in education with an eye to the future. Providing systems of support for students, and partnership relationships with parents, will help them achieve their goals, including the goals of graduating from college with credentials for professional careers. Educators can and must support African American students in accepting the risk of enrolling and persisting in advanced classes and promoting a collective approach to success. Families will help their children with college-going decisions if educators provide them with information, tools, and mutual investment in their children.

This study provided multiple interactions with native-born African American families that enabled their stories to be told. An example of the effectiveness of the three-interview protocol emerged with the second participant interviewed for the study. This participant was a profuse talker. He did not directly mention the African American community and its impact on his life until the third interview. He offered a unique story about being approached on the train by an African American man who told him to keep his head in his book and not end up like him. If I had not met with this student several times, this kernel of wisdom would not be a part of this story.

In 41 data-gathering encounters with African American students and parents in this study, the researcher found a place in her heart for their voices, sharing tears as students and their parents remembered experiences, hardships, words, and feelings during their interviews. Students revealed vulnerable moments and treasured secrets; parents expressed hopes and fears.
for their children. The uniqueness of each child and family must be treasured, considered, and valued as educators work to serve them.
“Comparison of High School African American Students’ and Their Families’ Perception of Involvement and Non-involvement in Gifted and AP Programs”

Student Participants Needed.

As part of an effort to increase equitable participation in Advanced Academics for all students and to fulfill the requirements of an advanced degree, I am inviting African American high school students in XXXX ISD to participate in a study at the University of North Texas.

Students currently in grades 10-12 are eligible for the study.

The time commitment for the student is approximately four hours consisting of three one-hour interviews and an orientation. Students and parents will be provided transcripts of the interviews after the meetings. Students will receive four hours of community service credit for their participation, and parents will receive a $25 dollar gift card.

Please contact XXXXXXXX at XXXXXX@XXXX.com if you would be interested in participation in this study for you and your child.

XXXXX ISD and University of North Texas have approved this study.

XXXXXXXXXXXXX
Coordinator
Gifted/Advanced Academics
XXXXX Independent School District
APPENDIX B

STUDENT AND FAMILY QUESTIONNAIRE
Student and Family Questionnaire

Please complete during the orientation meeting with students and family members to provide demographic information for semi-structured interview grouping.

Name_________________________________________________________________________
Age_______ Gender_______________ Ethnicity_____________________________________
School_____________________________________________________Grade_____________
AP Courses Taken_____________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
Current Courses on Schedule____________________________________________________
Current Overall High School GPA_______
GT Identification Grade_________ GT Participation Grades____________________________
Student’s Phone and Email______________________________________________________
Family Member’s Name and Relationship to Student_________________________________
Family Member’s Current Field of Employment____________________________________
Family Member’s Highest Level of Education______________________________________
Family Member’s Phone and Email_______________________________________________
Please do not write below this line.
*******************************************************************************
GAP_______    GNAP_______    NGAP_______  NGNAP_______
Assigned to Group # ________              # Participant in Group_______
Pseudonym__________________________________________________
Research Questions

The questions that will guide the study are the following:

1. What are the perspectives about gifted and advanced academics programs for native-born African American participants and non-participants in AP programs?

2. What are the perspectives about gifted and advanced academics programs for native-born African American family members of participants and non-participants in AP programs?

3. How do the perspectives of students and family members align with one another?

4. Semi-Structured Student Interview Groups:

   (1) Identified Gifted and taking AP
   (2) Identified Gifted and NOT taking AP
   (3) Not Identified Gifted and taking AP
   (4) Not Identified Gifted and NOT taking AP

Semi-structured Interview Questions for Students

Interview 1

1. Tell me about your school experiences from as far back as you can remember.

2. Tell me about your experiences with family and friends.

3. Tell me about yourself and your neighborhood interactions such as recreation or church activities.
4. How did you come to participate (or not participate) in gifted and/or advanced academics courses? Follow up for those not participating: Did you ever have the opportunity to become a part of gifted or AP coursework? Tell me that story.

5. What does it take to do well in AP courses?

Interview 2

1. Please share what you know about advanced academics courses (Pre-AP, AP, Gifted and Talented) in Irving schools?

2. What do you actually do in (a GT or AP) class? Describe the class in detail.

3. Talk about your relationship with teachers, counselors, and other students in your classes.

4. Reconstruct a day during school from when you wake up until you fall asleep.

5. Tell a story about something that happened in school regarding (AP or GT) classes.

Interview 3

1. Given what you have said about your life growing up, and given what you’ve said about your (AP or GT) school experience, how do you understand AP courses in your life? What sense do your choices make to you?

2. What kind of impact will taking gifted or AP (or not taking gifted or AP) courses have on your future goals?

3. What does your family think about the courses you have chose to take in high school?

4. Describe how your family talks about your school work and your future plans with you.

5. What does your community think about gifted and AP courses?

6. What do your friends think about gifted and AP courses?
7. What does it take to do well in gifted and AP courses?

8. What would you like to know that you do not already know about gifted and AP courses?

9. Given what you have reconstructed in these interviews, where do you see yourself going in the future?

10. Would you encourage or discourage participation in gifted and AP courses? Why?

Focus Group Questions for Adult Family Members

1. If your child has participated in gifted or Pre-AP and AP courses, please share how your child started in these courses.

2. What was your child like in kindergarten? In middle school? In high school?

3. What do you think about the gifted or advanced academics courses like Pre-AP or AP in your child’s school?

4. Please tell me about why your child or children are or are not in these courses?

5. If you know of any other children in these courses, what do you know about what their families think about these courses?

6. What does it take to be a part of these courses and stick with it?

7. What would you like to know that you do not already know about gifted or Pre-AP and AP courses?

8. Why would you encourage or discourage children taking these courses?

9. What would you like school personnel to know about your child? Tell me your story.

10. What from your history helps you think your child will be or will not be successful in these courses?

11. What does it mean to be a good student or a bright student?
12. What do you know about Gifted, Pre-AP or AP classes in Irving schools?

13. What do you think happens in gifted, Pre-AP, and AP classes that does not happen in other classes?

14. Districts take different approaches to supporting gifted and AP courses. I will give you three scenarios. Please share with me what you think about each situation. I have written them down so you can have all of the details. Do you think any of these would be better than what we have?

(a) One district identifies 5% of its population of students as gifted for each grade level regardless of the number of students who score above the minimum score required for identification. These students attend a special school for gifted learners.

(b) To participate in Pre-AP and AP courses, students must have an 85 average and score in the 90% percentile on an achievement test in the subject. Students must also miss no more than two days of school per semester for any reason.

(c) A district allows any student who is willing to work, is prepared, and has an interest in the subject to take Pre-AP or AP courses.
APPENDIX D

SCRIPT FOR INFORMATIONAL SESSION
Karen Zeske: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I would like to introduce you to the study I am conducting as a requirement for my Ph.D. studies with the University of North Texas. Part of the process includes ensuring that all participants and parents (if participants are less than 18 years old) understand the purpose and conditions of the study. I would like to read this form called “STUDENT INVESTIGATOR AND PARENT GUARDIAN CONSENT WITH MINOR ASSENT (AGES 7-17)” with you and then answer any questions you may have about this study. Would that be okay?

Family’s response.

Begin reading.

Karen Zeske: Before agreeing to your child’s participation in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

Title of Study: Comparison of High School African American Students’ and Their Families’ Perception of Involvement and Non-involvement in Gifted and AP Programs

Investigator: Karen Zeske, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Supervising Investigator: Dr. Mary Harris.

Purpose of the Study: You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research study which involves participation in three one-hour interviews. The interview will take place at school
under appropriate supervisory conditions at the child’s convenience or an outside venue of the students’ choice. The purpose of the study is to discover what African American communities understand about Advanced Academics courses and inform educators of what additional support they might need to help children successfully participate in these courses. The definition of success is qualifying for (GT only) or choosing to participate (Pre-AP or AP) and remain in the programs and earning course credit.

Study Procedures: After an informational meeting, your child will be asked to participate in three one-hour interviews with Karen Zeske. The interviews will be audio-taped to ensure accurate information is recorded.

Foreseeable Risks: The potential risks involved in this study include some discomfort in the topic of discussion with a white researcher from an academic setting. Peer curiosity or commentary may also potentially cause some embarrassment or discomfort.

Benefits to the Subjects or Others: We expect the project may benefit the child and his or her family by helping the community know more about Advanced Academics opportunities in the local schools, and we hope to better know how to share this information with African American communities to encourage and support inclusion. Educators will be informed of the perceptions and support needed for inclusion.

Compensation for Participants: Four hours of community service

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records: Names and locations will not be revealed in any written or oral sharing of this information. Interviewees will receive pseudonyms, and those codes identifying individuals will remained locked in a separate location
from the place of transcription or coding. The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. No visual representations of the children or classroom will be shared. If photographs or videotaping are utilized, the purpose is to identify the child for research purposes only, not publication.

Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the study, you may contact (Karen Zeske) at (XXXXX@XXX.com) or (Dr. Mary Harris) at(XXX@XXX.edu).

Review for the Protection of Participants: This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Research Participants’ Rights: Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- *Karen Zeske* has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You have been told the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to allow your child to take part in this study, and your refusal to allow your child to participate or your decision to withdraw him/her from the study will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your child’s participation at any time.
• You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.

• You understand your rights as the parent/guardian of a research participant and you voluntarily consent to your child’s participation in this study.

• You have been told you will receive a copy of this form.

________________________________
Printed Name of Parent or Guardian

________________________________                                            ____________
Signature of Parent or Guardian                                     Date

Karen Zeske: Note that I will also be signing this form as noted below. Do you have any questions at this point?

Family’s response.

For the Student Investigator or Designee: I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the parent or guardian signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the parent or guardian understood the explanation.

______________________________________                                 _______
Signature of Student Investigator      Date
Karen Zeske: There is also a portion of this document that the child must sign. I now review this portion of the form with the student participant.

Child Assent Form

You are being asked to be part of a research project being done by the University of North Texas Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

This study involves finding out what students and families know about gifted and talented, Pre-AP and AP classes in schools.

You will be asked to talk about educational classes, what you know about them, and what you would like to know. It will take place in three one-hour interviews.

If you decide to be part of this study, please remember you can stop participating any time you want.

If you would like to be part of this study, please sign your name below.

__________________________      Printed Name of Child

__________________________       Signature of Child     Date

__________________________       Signature of Student Investigator                   Date

Karen Zeske: Do either of you have any questions?
Family response.

Karen Zeske response. Answer questions and explain.

Karen Zeske: If you have no additional questions, please sign this form. Let’s schedule the time and place of the first interview. When we have completed all interviews for the four participants in the group, I will contact you to schedule the focus group for family members. Thanks for agreeing to participate in the study and for your time today.
REFERENCES


Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, University of Iowa.


Delilse, J. & Galbraith, J. (2002). *When gifted kids don’t have all the answers: How to meet their social and emotional needs*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.


http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era


Oseguera, L. (2013).” Importance of high school conditions for college access.” Pathways to Postsecondary Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty. UC/ACCORD Research Brief no. 7


