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Leveling the Playing Field: Ensuring African-American Students Access to Advanced Placement Courses

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LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: ENSURING AFRICAN-AMERICAN

STUDENTS ACCESS TO ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSES

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A teacher affects eternity; she can never tell where her influence stops.

Henry Adams

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ALISA LAWSON-MCKINNIE

ABSTRACT

The underrepresentation of African-American high school students in advanced placement classes must be understood in terms of broader school contexts and practices. This qualitative study investigated how teachers and guidance counselors contribute to the academic success of African-American students of high potential at a large suburban high school in the city of Cleveland. The purpose was to improve the participation and performance of these students in AP courses. Data indicates that (a) school employees (teachers and guidance counselors) can positively affect achievement, (b) their definitions of success shape these students' opportunities for achievement, and (c) developing the capacities of high-potential students necessitates supported access to a challenging curriculum.

The College Board's report: *Equity 2000: A Systemic Education Form Model* stressed that although minority students who complete higher level math courses actually enroll in college at the same rate as their non-minority peers, a concern is that the minority students, especially African-American students, often have had a less demanding and relevant curricula. African-American students are not enrolled in or do not participate in a rigorous curriculum to the degree that non-minority students are participating. I collected data using observations, interviews, and focus groups. I targeted a large suburban high school that offered nineteen advanced placement courses, and one that had a reputation of effectiveness in supporting the academic success of

African-American students. I determined why advanced placement courses were not a part of the curriculum design for these students and how to increase their enrollment in the courses.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the United States marked the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court case, Brown vs. the Board of Education. This classic law decision highlighted the need for a stronger education system and the importance of ensuring that all students have equal access and opportunity to participate in challenging and productive academic programs and instructional experiences. The identification of gifted and high-achieving students has been a national concern for decades. In 1950, the Educational Policies Commission stated that one major goal of educational and social policy should be to "find ways and means of conserving the superior abilities of gifted Americans – and of developing those abilities and facilitating their use for the benefit of humanity (Clark, 1998). Forty years later, a national report released by the U.S. Department of Education (1993) coined the educational system for high ability students as a "quiet crisis" (Daniels, 2003). Simply put African-American students with capabilities to excel academically and artistically underachieve because they are under-challenged.

Of special concern is the neglect of the talents of children who are economically disadvantaged or of a racial or ethnic minority population who may be overlooked for

programs that would identify their talents and provide relevant and appropriate

educational services addressing their needs (Ford, 1994). Although African American

students comprise about 24% of the total U.S. public school enrollment (p. 9), they are

gravely underrepresented in gifted, advanced placement and/or honors classes or

programs. W.E.B. DuBois (1973) defined education as "crucial and critical" to the lives

of African-Americans (p. 31). He emphasized that "on one point, therefore, there can be

no question – no hesitation: unless we develop our full capabilities, we cannot survive"

(p. 34). The largest "nonuse, misuse or inefficient use" of human resources in existence

involves the underrepresentation of economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse

populations of children in gifted programs (p. 35).

Having spent almost 30 years as a secondary teacher and administrator, I have

experience working with some strong educational programs offered to our public school

students. I also recognize the academic achievements of many students and have

observed the successful transition of many of them to post-secondary experiences. I am

currently an administrator at a high school that offers a wide range of academic and

elective courses to students. We provide an extensive menu of various honors and

advanced placement courses to students in grades 9-12, and these classes offer a

challenging and rigorous academic curriculum. An area of concern and question

continues to be the small number of African-American students who are enrolled in and

participate in advanced placement (AP) courses. These numbers are not representative of

the total minority populations in the school where I am principal or in schools across the

city, state or nation.

Public school systems serve a broad range of students from a variety of personal, societal and educational backgrounds. As noted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "Forty-two percent of public schools students were considered to be part of a racial or ethnic minority grouping in 2008, an increase from 22 percent in 1982. Caucasian students made up 58 percent of public school enrollment, Hispanics represented 27 percent, African-American students made up 19 percent, with other minority groups making up 11 percent" (2001). This data represents a large and diverse student population and leads to the importance of educators identifying and addressing diverse student needs. While family, health, physical and psychological factors can play an important role and affect individual student academic performance and potential, our educational system is mandated and required to provide sound and engaging educational programs and services to all students. The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a reformed and revised law from the 1965 and 1994 Education of Secondary and Elementary Education Acts (ESEA) and Goals 2000, have stressed the need for standards based assessment, increased accountability and local control in addressing the needs for all students.

With the legislative mandates and documented minority achievement data, educators are compelled to examine current practices, review existing programs, and consider alternative interventions and strategies to address the interests and needs of minority students.   One avenue to increase minority achievement and performance is exposure to and participation in challenging academic curricula and programs. One specific scheme to achieve this goal is to increase student enrollment in AP courses.

A focus for this area of research included examining how African-American students are recruited for AP courses, how they are supported when enrolled in an AP course and why many high-achieving African-American juniors and seniors do not enroll in AP courses at a high school that is primarily African-American, offers 19 AP courses and where 56% of African-American seniors go to college. Additional or subsequent topics included identifying which individuals influence these high school students and their attitudes and behavior toward AP academic courses and how these individuals become influential. It was essential to determine how educators impact academic preparation, course selection and enrollment in academic courses. It was equally important to ascertain which specific initiatives and programs positively sway and increase minority enrollment in AP courses. This research can lead to further study of the factors that effect and facilitate positive student performance in these courses and on the related/required AP exams.

My professional journeys have led me to desire to research exceptional educational programs and practices that promote and support minority achievement. I am interested in identifying the individuals, interventions, and strategies that can influence and increase African-American enrollment and achievement in academically challenging classes, like AP courses.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is not just itself, the underrepresentation of minority students in AP classes, but also the underlying issues of why underrepresentation exists and what can be done to minimize its occurrence. The problem of identification and nurturing of talent is a concern. Most educational experts

agree that the minority achievement gap in our nation's schools is a long-standing

problem. An achievement gap can be defined as the disparity between the academic

performances of different groups of students and it can be found when comparing

economic, racial and ethnic variables (Grantham, 2002). There is a range of

socioeconomic factors that cause the minority achievement problem and many of these

dynamics are not under the control of educators. These can include low birth weight,

poor nutrition and health care, low parent educational attainment, poor parenting, lack of

exposure to educational and cultural experiences, lack of family structure and stability

and high mobility rates. School elements that may contribute to the gap may include a

lack of rigorous curriculum or classes, inexperienced or poorly trained teachers, low

expectations of staff, few resources or lack of adequate funding, negative peer pressure,

lack of preschool and other readiness programs, and disciplinary and safety issues

(Frasier & Passow, 2004).

The specific idea of this study was that providing a strong academic curriculum,

programs and services for students, including African-American high school students, is

under the control and influence of educators and the school. There was also a major

concern over the lack of strong academic programs that are available and advocated for

African-American high school students.   As noted by Adam Gamoran (2000), professor

at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, there are differences in "academic content and

classroom experiences that confront students in the same grade level but different

schools, classes and instructional groups" (2008). Gamoran's 2000 research on analyzing

numerous studies show there is great variance in curriculum, grading standards and

grouping of students across various schools. There was also identified concern that

minority students are often placed in less-challenging classes with more inexperienced teachers. Gamoran (2000) also noted that "at the high school level, high poverty schools are less likely to offer advanced math and science courses than other schools. And even in schools that do offer such courses, poor and minority students enroll far less often" (p. 5).

Significance of the Study

Various studies have shown that to increase student achievement and promote college enrollment, all students, including African-American students, must have access to and participate in a rigorous academic curriculum during their high school years. While social support, parental involvement and knowledge, and access to post-secondary resources and information are also crucial for students, the school sphere of influence and impact is strongest in the area of providing students with sound instructional programs. In order to learn and increase achievement, students need access to a high-quality and well-crafted curriculum. Research on school reform indicates that "academic press," a demanding, constrained curriculum for all students, along with a strong organizational push for individual students to take and master these courses, improves student achievement. While shared goals and values, positive student student-teacher relationships, and mentoring can promote school engagement and achievement, the most positive academic outcomes are derived from students being offered demanding curriculum and interacting with teachers who have high educational expectations for them (Morris, 2002). Researchers further expand on this concept when highlighting that minority students also benefit from the rigorous curriculum. The evidence shows that a

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demanding curriculum has intellectual and practical benefits for students of all backgrounds, races, and ethnicities across secondary educational experiences.

This theory is also highlighted in the College Board's report (2001), *Equity 2000: A systemic education form model* where it is stressed "that low income and minority students who complete higher level math courses actually enroll in college at the same rate as their non-minority peers, with those same academic experiences" (p. 6). It is a concern that in examining the ethnic make-up of the upper-level academic classes across our nation's public schools, they are often found to be "predominately White," and the lower-level classes, which often have less demanding and relevant curricula, are composed of predominantly Non-White students (p, 7). It is clear that minority students are not enrolled in or do not participate in a rigorous curriculum to the degree that white students are participating in these academic learning opportunities.

"Only by ensuring that the maximum number of learners consistently experience the highest quality curriculum, as well as appropriate coaching, mentoring, and support, will these individual students, and society as a whole, benefits from their possibilities" (Borland & Wright, 2007). The identification, placement and services for all students, including gifted students, must lead individuals to maximize their potential and engage in learning. This thinking has also led to the concept of maximizing the potential of all students and in turn providing enriched and academically challenging curriculum to the entire student population. The field of education needs more well-designed curricula and materials that are research-based with proven effectiveness for all learners. The education system must provide young individuals with rigorous, high-quality, and varied

educational experiences that increase their academic skills and prepare them for successful transition to post-secondary experiences.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research was to conduct and analyze an in depth case study of a high school that offers nineteen AP courses but has very few African-American junior and seniors enrolled in those courses. The focus was on identifying individuals, programs and practices the school and staff utilizes to increase enrollment of African-American students in AP courses.

Methodology

For this research, I used case-study methodology. The data collected for this research was qualitative in nature and included interviewing African-American seniors and observing focus group sessions with school personnel. I observed and collected relevant documents and artifacts. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative coding schemes with NVivo. A potential outcome of this study was that the information retrieved from this study can be used to help educators identify initiatives that influence and facilitate an increased enrollment of African-American students in AP courses.

Research Questions

The overarching questions for this study:

1. How do the school policies and procedures impact African-American student enrollment in AP courses?

2. What are the perceptions and experiences of teachers, guidance counselors and African-American students in these processes?

3. To what extent do schools support the academic achievement of African-American students in AP courses?

4. What academic and social challenges do African-American students face in AP classes?

Definition of Terms

Advanced Placement (AP) Program: The Advanced Placement (AP) Program is a curriculum in the United States that is sponsored by the College Board. This program offers 35 rigorous AP courses that are generally recognized to be the equivalent to undergraduate courses in college (http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jpf).

College Board: A non-profit organization that has continued to develop and maintain the Advanced Placement program, support high schools, colleges and universities, and coordinate the administration of annual AP examinations since 1955 (College Board, 2008).

Minority Students: The terms African American and minority are used interchangeably throughout this study. The term was sometimes used to refer to racially, ethnically, linguistically, or culturally diverse students.   These students are typically underserved in programs for advanced learners (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2001).

Urban School: The term urban school used throughout this study refers to schools located in metropolitan areas that are characterized by high ethnic and linguistic diversity enrollment and by high low-income enrollment. The number of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch is used as a proxy measure of low-income (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2001).

Assumptions

For the purpose of the study, there was the assumption the subjects would be honest and truthful when answering the interview questions and in the focus group discussions. The results and validity of the study depended on the subjects providing truthful answers during their interviews as this would become a part of the data collection process as well as the foundation to help address the research questions.

Organization of the Study

The study is organized into five chapters. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the interviews of high achieving African-American seniors in an urban high school along with analyzing the results of focus group sessions, which guidance counselors and teachers participated in. The study consists of five chapters. The first chapter lays a foundation of the topic and gives a brief synopsis and history of the problem of underrepresented African-American high school students in AP classes. The second chapter consists of a review of pertinent literature for this topic. The third chapter gives an overview of the intended methodology for the study. In the fourth chapter the findings of the interviews with the participants and their responses to the open-ended questionnaire are described. Lastly, the final chapter discusses the results and conclusions of the study.

Rationale for the Study

This study is important because of the lack of results-driven research in this area. The achievement gap is widely discussed and written about students who are at-risk or who are on the lower end of the academic spectrum, but there is less research about those

high-achieving African-American students who are not pushed to reach their academic

potential and leave high school still left behind.

CHAPTER II

LITERARY REVIEW

The Importance of High Academic Expectations and Rigorous, Relevant

Curriculum

In the U.S. Department of Education's report, *Key high school reform strategies: An overview of research findings*, researchers analyzed 300 school reform studies conducted in the previous five years. The common themes or elements identified in effective and successful schools included: commitment to high academic expectations; small learning environments; structuring learning around career/student interest; professional development focused on instruction; career and higher education counseling; rigorous, flexible and relevant instruction; appropriate assessment; partnerships with higher education; and key alliances with parents and communities. Once again, the importance of providing a strong academic curriculum for students is emphasized (2010).

William Daggett, President of the International Center for Leadership in Education, has for years highlighted the importance of rigor, relevance, and relationships in providing instruction to our nation's students. In focusing on the rigor aspect of the curriculum, Daggett (2009) states, "Rigor requires students to make a substantial personal

investment in their own learning. Students involved in rigorous learning are deeply engaged in thought, critical analysis, debate, research, synthesis, problem solving, and reflection; they are exercising their cognitive abilities to the maximum" (p. 29).

In 2000, Quick and Quick completed an analysis of five types of high achieving schools. Included in their report, *High poverty-high success: Schools that defy the odds*, was an analysis of the *Beating the odds study, benchmark school study, hope for urban study, 90-90-90 schools*, and *No excuses schools* reports:

> Central to student and school success in these studies were five identified elements that included: (a) a commitment to a rigorous and relevant curriculum for all students; (b) implementing testing programs that evaluate students' conceptual knowledge and their ability to apply knowledge; (c), a focused and sustained staff development training program; (d) commitment to addressing behavior; and (e) willingness to make changes to benefit students. Again, the number one characteristic highlighted in the research is that a rigorous and relevant curriculum is necessary for all students (p.31).

The relationships among having high student expectations, providing rigorous curricula, and thus demonstrated student achievement are documented throughout the recent literature and research.

Barriers to Enrolling Students in Academic Courses

In recent years, states and school districts have begun to examine course enrollment practices for students. Educators are attempting to analyze their policies and procedures to determine if they are being restrictive or inclusive in their efforts to enroll and group students in academic programs. Many schools continue to enforce rigid

admissions and enrollment policies that many educators refer to as "gate-keeping" (Rhodes, 1992).   In examining educational research on high school course placement, it is noted that large or disproportionate numbers of minority students were found to be in the general education courses with primarily White students being in the academic courses (LeCourt, 2004).

Oakes and Guiton (2008) further emphasized this point in their study of three school systems, where African-American and Latino students with the same test scores were not placed in higher-level academic courses. Course selection or grouping of students can begin as early as elementary school and the choice of middle school courses can set the foundation or level for selection of high school academic courses. School personnel who are involved in academic advisement and can influence course placement include teachers, counselors, and administrators who may or may not encourage students to enroll in upper level courses. "School personnel often cite concern over students' abilities or skill levels as having a negative impact on their eligibility for or performance in these academic courses" (p. 21). Affluent and/or educated parents may insist that students be placed in advanced courses and may challenge procedures for course and program selection more ready than less-affluent/less-educated parents who more often accept the level assignments made by school staff (Oakes & Guiton, 2008).

Disproportionately low placement of minority students, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, in more challenging curricula may also stem from the procedures used to identify students as gifted or as eligible for high-level courses. Excessive reliance on standardized test scores may narrow the range of students considered for placement, particularly in schools where rigid cut off scores are employed

as a means of selection. Some educators have argued for a more expanded identification

process including (a) psychometric information from various sources (e.g. creativity and

achievement tests as well as IQ tests), (b) developmental information from teachers,

parents, and the student (via rating scales, personal narratives, and/or teacher

recommendations), and (c) academic performance information such as grades and

accomplishments in school and non-school settings (Klopkensten, 2004).

In examining enrollment policies of schools, rigid criteria and entrance

requirements are often set to determine who can participate in the academic courses.

There has also been concern that many schools use only a single criterion, such as a

PSAT score or class rank, for selecting and enrolling students in AP courses. There is

often no consideration given to other factors or means of assessment and evaluation. In

many cases, there is not any analysis of other areas of student skills or strengths

considered when determining placement in academic courses. Educators have noted that

many schools have not utilized the wide range of selection criteria that could include

varied data such as test scores, alternative screening and assessment tools, transcripts,

teacher recommendations, individual interview, and self-selection procedures.   There is

also not always adequate academic advising for students. Often information regarding

expectations and requirements for these academic courses is not shared. In addition, the

academic course sequences that best prepare students for college and post-secondary

experiences are often not addressed or discussed with students or families.

As more schools have pushed for open access to AP classes, teachers report

concerns of struggling students and difficulties maintaining the rigor of the program

(Freeman, 2005). Even though most teachers report that AP course quality and student

achievement on AP exams have remained the same over the last five years, many teachers also report that the overall ability of their students has lowered, with many students struggling in their AP courses. In a study of three Even though most teachers report that AP course quality and student achievement on AP exams have remained the same over the last five years, many teachers also report that the overall ability of their students has lowered, with many students struggling in their AP courses ().

In a study conducted by Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Suh (2003) 1,500 Gates Millennium Scholarship Fall 2001 winners were surveyed about the relationships between high school preparation and college attendance. The survey included questions about background information, degree aspirations, beliefs and values, family support for college, high school academic preparation, and undergraduate activities. Fifty-six of these individuals also participated in a focus group interview activity. Questions covered included topics related to sources of college information, access to resources, and facilitators and barriers for college preparation. "This research demonstrates that urban, low-income students of color encounter unique challenges gaining access to rigorous academic courses, adequate educational resources, quality instruction, early college counseling, and other college pre-requisites" (Amidon, 1991). The results highlighted that formal academic tracking prevented certain groups of students from accessing academic courses. They noted that interactions with counselors and teachers were influenced by negative racial/ethnic stereotypes. They also voiced concerns about how negative racial/ethnic stereotypes caused school personnel and students from other cultural background to unfairly question their academic abilities.

Another barrier to minority participation in the AP program is the fee for taking an exam in each subject area. A student looking to gain significant college credits may be forced to pay $400 or more to take the necessary AP tests. The College Board does offer a fee reduction for students with a financial need. However, even a lower exam fee may put the cost of the tests out of reach for many families. This research reinforced the need to continue to examine school procedures pertaining to tracking or grouping students, policies on providing access to academic courses, and selective distribution of educational materials and resources to African-American students and their families.

Deficit Theories

Deficit theories assume that children, in this case African-American children, lack the knowledge and skills necessary for school achievement because of cultural, biological, environmental, or social differences. Deficit theorists blame students, their families and cultures for their underachievement. Proponents of this perspective argue that schools can do little to change this phenomenon. One contributing factor to the AP gap in schools may be that teachers and other school personnel hold deficit beliefs and perceptions of African-American students. Deficit perspectives of these students can influence teacher expectations of students and the nature of relationships that develop between teachers and students and their parents.   In order to increase equality in advanced classes, one area on which to place focus are teacher recommendations.

Since high achievement is usually "defined and measured by the majority culture" (Fletcher-Jantzen & Ortiz, 2006), teachers often fail to identify academically gifted students who are not of their own culture, and their "beliefs about giftedness" are "colored by cultural perceptions" (Miller, 2009). This lack of understanding of different

cultures is exacerbated by the fact that the cultural make-up of the teaching staff is often far different from that of the student body. The majority of U.S. teachers (80% to 90%) are Caucasian (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2010). Ironically, based on a 2008 study by Cushner, McClelland, and Stafford, it is reported that by the year 2040, "children from different culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are expected to be the majority in classrooms" (Elhoweris, et al., 2010, p. 19).

With the culturally rich school population growing each year, school systems must begin to address the lack of referrals of these minority students to the AP program. While ethnicity should not determine a child's referral to advanced classes, studies have shown that teachers have "negative stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions of children from different cultural backgrounds" (Urban, 2010, p. 21). Further studies also indicate that students from minority backgrounds and low socioeconomic levels are often evaluated in a biased manner when teachers rank academic achievement and behavior. In fact, one study even found that teachers who are of a different cultural background than their students often view "culture-specific behaviors as reflecting cultural deficits rather than a source of giftedness" (VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007). This bias is not deliberate on the teachers' part. Often, teachers just have "internal unexamined conceptions of what it means to be gifted" (Miller, 2009).

Reforms

With the passage of the federal law concerning elementary and secondary education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the public has come to focus on and examine our educational system. Extensive federal and state legislation has been passed by elected officials with their goal being educational reform that will result in improved

schools and increased student achievement. The majority of the initiatives that have been created and implemented relate to the areas of standards, assessment and accountability.

Over the past decade, the federal government has required all states to establish high-quality standards which outline curriculum objectives and emphasize what students are required to know at each grade level and for specific courses. There is also the requirement of providing aligned assessments that measure student achievement and progress towards meeting the specified standards. The premise for these mandates is increased accountability from the schools.   Ohio House Bill 487 established new requirements for earning a high school diploma in Ohio.

New graduation requirements take effect with the class of 2018. Each tested subject has an end-of-course state test with two parts. Part one is the performance-based assessment, where students construct their responses that are scored by a team of trained education professionals.   Part two is the end-of-year test where students respond to items that are then computer scored. The score for the end-of-course test is a combination of both Parts.   Students in the classes of 2014 - 2017 and those who are repeating ninth grade will continue to operate under Ohio's current graduation requirements. Students in 20 states, accounting for more than half of all public school students in the U.S., are required to pass exit examinations in order to graduate from high school. These changes show there is a focus on improving student achievement and ensuring that all students, including identified subgroups of students, are learning.

Robert Marzano, researcher for Mid-continent for Research and Learning (McREL), has examined thirty-five years of educational literature and research. After an extensive review of over 5,000 studies and a meta-analysis of the seventy various

research studies that met specified criteria and involved 2,802 schools, 14, 000 teachers and 1.4 million school students, he identified various factors that contribute to or impact student ach highly successful schools. From his research analysis, Marzano (2011) has identified five characteristics of highly successful schools. These include a guaranteed and viable curriculum, challenging goals and effective feedback, parent and community involvement, a safe and orderly environment, and collegiality and professionalism.

Identified under the main category of school-level factors and listed in order of importance, the number one requirement for student achievement is a guaranteed and viable curriculum that addresses content standards. Marzano (2011) further explains the importance of educators identifying the standards essential for all students to learn and the need for established goals to challenge students and suppress or eliminate the achievement gap. This extensive research highlights the importance of focusing on and providing rigorous and academic curriculum for all students.

Gifted and talented programs have traditionally been viewed as an option for students to access rigorous curriculum. One concern regarding this curricular option is that students often must first be identified as gifted and talented prior to enrolling in and accessing the programs. The federal government's longstanding definition of giftedness states: "Gifted and talented children are those identified by professional qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to society" (Rury, 2005, p. 52). The definition goes on to highlight that these children are capable of high performance and include those with demonstrated achievement and/or

potential ability in any single or combination of six identified areas: (a) general intellectual ability; (b) specific academic ability; (c) creative or productive thinking; (d) leadership ability; (e) visual or performing arts; and (f) psychomotor ability. Historically, the identification and selection of student for gifted and talented programs primarily involved the use of IQ and achievement tests. These assessments limited the number of minority or culturally diverse students enrolled in gifted and talented programs (Davis, 1997)

Many of these students excelled in abilities and skill areas not conducive to identification using traditional testing instruments. Thus, many of these minority individuals were not being identified and were not being served in gifted and talented programs. During this time also the U.S. Department of Education (1993) also released the report, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* emphasizing the need to recognize and develop abilities and talents in students. These students "exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor" (p. 27). The emphasis was on assessing more individual student strengths and thus providing more expanded and appropriate services for a larger and more diversified population of gifted and talented individuals. Recruitment efforts have also focused on increasing school staff, parent and student referrals of diverse students and expanding the sources of evidence that capture the strengths and varied abilities of diverse groups (Braddock, 1990). It is noted that gifted students benefit from acceleration relating to moving through the school or curriculum more quickly than the

average students. The more rapid or faster presentation of content is implemented to more closely match the speed at which gifted students learn. Acceleration means moving through the traditional curriculum at faster rates than usual to match the level and complexity of the curriculum with the readiness, abilities, and motivation of the student. "Acceleration includes single-subject acceleration, whole-grade skipping, early-entrance to school and Advanced Placement courses" (Braddock, 1990, p. 10).

Rogers (1991), in an analysis of thirteen research summaries on acceleration practices, concluded that non-graded classrooms, curriculum compaction and subject acceleration practices produce significant academic gains for students. "Students who are gifted and talented should be given experiences involving a variety of appropriate acceleration-based options, which may be offered to gifted students as a group or on an individual basis" (Rogers, 1991, p. 17). A 2003 national report supported by the John Templeton Foundation concluded that acceleration is positively regarded by students as they feel academically challenged as well as socially accepted (Karlsen, 2002). A current goal of educators is to provide equitable opportunities and learning experiences for all students, including gifted students. All children should be viewed as having potential and abilities.

Initiatives to Increase Skills and Provide Academic Support to Minority Students

Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) is a national organization comprised of 25 school districts and is dedicated to high academic achievement for minority students and to eliminate the minority achievement gap. This organization is focused on collaborative communication, research, and professional development. MSAN hosts various sessions throughout the year that include superintendent, teacher,

and student meetings. The Network has also participated in a recent initiative where it sponsored conferences for high-achieving minority students.   Representatives from MSAN meet with university and other school staffs and peers from across the country to discuss and explore why some African American and Latino students achieve while others underachieve compared to their White and Asian American peers. In reviewing conference discussions, MSAN staff states that student participants cite the importance of supportive relationships with adults as the most important factor in their success (Alson, 2003).

The Minority Achievement Committee or MAC Scholars Program was initiated in Shaker Heights, Ohio to address the issue of providing mentoring services and support to minority students. To counter a peer culture that sometimes would belittle academic success and to nurture self-esteem, this program was instituted in 1999 to provide encouragement, role models, and on-going academic and social support to minority students (Alson, 2003).

Advanced Placement Program and Courses

One of the strongest initiatives implemented to increase academic standards and provide a rigorous academic curriculum for secondary students has been the offering of AP program courses in high schools. AP courses are considered college-level classes and have a standardized curriculum for each subject area that is created and distributed by The College Examination Education Board. By providing these programs to high school students, they are given the opportunity to participate in strong instructional programs and can earn college credit since the courses curricula are aligned with college entry

requirements. Most schools grant college credit to students who have completed the AP courses and who earn passing scores on the course-related AP Exams.

The College Board created the AP Program in 1955. Many secondary schools have also developed and implemented "Honors" and "Pre-AP" courses which prepare students to then transition to AP courses. These courses provide students with in-depth and enriched curricula to increase student content knowledge as well as to facilitate their development of critical thinking, learning strategies, and study skills. Another key feature of the program is encouraging high school and middle school personnel to formulate and coordinate curriculum alignment through the use of vertical teams, which are created by bringing together content teachers in grades 7-12 to create an academic scope and sequence. These teachers collaborate to develop the scope and sequence of the curriculum and identify objectives for all academic and content courses. These efforts have been seen as initiatives to increase the number of students prepared for and enrolled in rigorous academic classes while at the same time enforcing the concepts of high expectations and achievement levels for middle and high school students.

In 2003, approximately 500,000 students took an AP test. By 2013 the number of AP examinees doubled (College Board, 2010). Since its inception, Report to the Nation has highlighted the equity gap in AP participation and performance for traditionally underserved minority students. Data shows that African-Americans were the most underrepresented group in AP classrooms and in the population of successful AP exam takers (College Board, 2010). Although this decrease is significant, part of the increase in the AP program has been that as high schools have considered reform initiatives, the use of this program is seen as a vehicle to increase the rigor in curriculum while also

better preparing students for post-secondary education that includes college and university experiences. Many urban schools do not have AP programs. In a report, The College National High School Survey noted that, "with 18,000 participating schools, only 572 schools offered at least 10 AP courses, 920 schools offered 5 courses and 6,038 schools offered no AP courses" (College Board, 2010, p. 11). These low numbers represent the concern that many students, specifically those in inner city schools, do not have access to rigorous curriculum and strong academic opportunities.

Minority Student Under-representation in Advanced Placement Program Courses

Exploring and examining procedures and processes for enrolling minority students in advanced academic courses first came to the educational forefront with the National Institute of Education Report, Research on Selection Methods and Programming for Advanced Black Students at the Secondary Level of Education (Sanders, Baraka, & Sherman, 1981). An early examination of high school course enrollments in the Shaker Heights, Ohio school district identified a high number of African-American students who were enrolled in remedial courses and an imbalance of Caucasian students who were enrolled in honors and advanced placement courses. The researchers also determined that it would be beneficial to collect data from nineteen other school systems with similar large minority student populations and also to examine districts where racial balances or adequate population representations were noted for advanced course enrollments.

The data collected and analyzed from the Shaker Heights district revealed that there were high numbers of minority students in early middle school academic classes but those numbers decreased when the students transitioned to the high school grade levels.

Researchers conducted interviews with school district personnel that included school board members, central and school administrators, teachers, parents, citizens, and students. Data also revealed that there were questions about whether or not teachers had the skills or expertise to identify all students with aptitude for being successful in academic courses and there were also concerns expressed about adequate transitional programs for students across all grade levels. It was also emphasized that there were no specific programs or interventions identified to promote or support minority students in academic courses.

In interviewing 51 Shaker Heights high school students, "the following reasons were given for enrolling in academic courses: challenging (30%), college preparation (45%), required (12%), continuation of sequence (12%), and counselor recommendation (4%)" (Sanders, Baraka, & Sherman, 1981, p. 26). When asked who most influenced their decisions to take a course, the responses included: "myself (25%), counselor (29%), teacher (10%), parent (5%), friends (6%), and siblings (4%)" (Sanders, et al., 1981, p. 27). There was no evidence that attributed the racial imbalance to one or a few causes as each of the factors on the student interview questionnaire were a potential influence. Another noteworthy observation was that sometimes minority youth chose not to take advantage of opportunities offered to them. Reasons for this or identified factors cited included "conscious and unconscious discrimination by peers, teachers, and counselors, as well as lack of information about how to make the schools system work for the student" (Sanders, et al., 1981, p. 33).

Schools with high minority student advanced course enrollments cited the importance of strong public relations programs where AP Program course information

was published in newspapers, school publications, and course catalogues. Career fairs held at each school level were also listed as interventions. It was also emphasized that there was a strong level of commitment and involvement from counselors with students and families. Staff development training for teachers was provided throughout the school year and summer workshops for counselors and teachers were held frequently. There were recruiting efforts to attract minority teachers for academic courses. There was also an awareness of the need for early recognition to attract potential students in the middle schools. Minority college students were recruited to speak or tutor high school students.

Equally important is the fact that current trends in minority representation are moving backwards instead of forward. While states were found to be closing the "equality and excellence gaps" in 2006, by 2007, only one state had closed this gap for minority students, showing that equity is "not moving in the right direction" (Whiting & Ford, 2009). Solorzano and Ornelas (2002) found that in schools with a high enrollment in AP classes and a high enrollment of minority students, the minority students were still underrepresented, creating a "school within schools" phenomenon. Students who do not take AP classes "are at a distinct disadvantage" for acceptance into college; therefore, schools are not providing all students with same curriculum and are, in essence, setting up these students for failure (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002).

Social Identity

Joseph's Crane social contagion theory stresses that "like begets like" (Human Resources Development Canada, 2005). His theory supports the point that a child's neighborhood impacts what he expects for himself. Because of the "role of imitation, modeling, and social learning from a child's neighborhood peers," if most of the students

in a neighborhood do not see the importance of a rigorous education, then those students who do see this importance run the risk of being outcast from the community and even from their families (Human Resources Development Canada, 2005, p. 3). This may also account for the number of minority and low-income students who choose not to participate in AP classes. In the most recently released AP Report to the Nation, statistics show that 80% of African Americans who have potential to succeed in an AP course do not take the recommended AP subject because they believe it "is not something they do" (College Board, 2012, p. 12).

Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008) found that while many African-American students have the ability to do well in school, many do not put forth the "effort necessary to achieve at high levels" (p. 221). Part of that lack of effort comes from their perception of "stereotype threats" . The results of the study found that these young students chose not to participate in AP classes because they would be perceived as "acting White" by their peers . Many also did not believe that they could do well in the advanced classes because they would not fit in; they felt they would have no friends in the classes, and they thought that the teachers would have "low expectations of them academically, intellectually, and socially" (Ford, et al., 2008, p. 224). Perhaps most important to these young men, they did not want to take AP classes because they ran the risk of being totally ostracized. They felt that they would be ostracized by the students within and outside of the classroom. "The desire to have friends and to be popular, as well as to avoid alienation, isolation, and rejection," (Ford, et al., 2008, p. 223) may be key in their decision to avoid advanced classes. This is especially true when many feel that their

education may not lead them to success in a world full of "such social injustices as prejudice and discrimination" (Ford, et al., 2008, p. 220).

School Connectedness

Many high school students pack their schedules with AP classes as a way to boost their GPAs, enhance college applications and get a jump-start on credits toward an undergraduate degree. Current educational initiatives advise students to take courses they are interested in and that have a connection to post-high school. This guarantees students will experience more success and higher grades simply because it is something they enjoy. Although school connectedness often is overlooked as schools face significant pressures regarding academic performance, academic and lifelong success is related to feeling emotionally engaged and connected to the school environment. This is often just as important as course rigor. Several theoretical orientations such as the belongingness hypothesis (e.g., humans have an emotional need to be an accepted member of a group) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (e.g., basic needs must be met before individuals will strongly desire secondary or higher-level needs) imply that the feelings of belonging and social connectedness are fundamental human needs (Baumeister & Leary, 2000). Therefore, along with efforts to educate and to foster students' healthy academic and intellectual development, the onus is on schools and members of school communities to reach out and connect with students on a social–emotional level.

The AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) Program, implemented at the high school six years ago, is designed to enroll under-served students in post-secondary education and reach under-served students in the middle. These "middle" students are those not identified as underachieving, but not identified high achievers

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either. Also, through participation in AVID more Blacks are enrolling in post-secondary education at rates that are considerably higher than national averages. Fifty-five percent of the AVID African-American graduates enrolled in four year colleges. (Becker, 2012). Students could take AP courses and be scheduled for an AVID class as a support and resource in order to excel in the AP class.

Quality high school courses should provide students with the study skills, confidence, and habits of mind conducive to college success. Many African-American students do enroll in these classes and are successful. Preparing students for the academic demands of college should be the primary goal of all school offerings. Students should be challenged by all academic material, but perhaps more important, they should learn study skills and habits of mind conducive to success. While a rigorous high school curriculum clearly impacts the likelihood of early success in college, AP courses are not the only necessary components of a rigorous curriculum. AP experience may serve as a signal of high ability and motivation, but it does not by itself indicate superior academic readiness (College Board, 2008).

Better prepared and more highly motivated students are more likely to choose to take AP courses and exams. Much of those students' later success in college may be due not to the AP classes themselves, but to the personal characteristics that led them to participate in the classes in the first place – better academic preparation, stronger motivation, better family advantages, and so on. Mickelson and Velasco's (2006) study reveals that there are some common experiences that contributes to students' achievement. "Among factors influencing success are: (a) supportive parents, (b) self-discipline, (c) caring teachers, (d) community initiatives, and (e) role models" (Mickelson

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& Velasco, 2006, p. 9). There are a variety of African-American professionals – dentists, doctors, attorneys, teachers, the President – who serve as role models. Students are able to see themselves in these roles. There are many teachers who do inspire and encourage students to do and be their best. Connecting with students is a goal of many educational initiatives, so teachers are urged to nurture both the academics and social and emotional beings of all students. Thus, school climate is an important factor in their overall success. School climate consists of the attitudes, beliefs and values that underlie students' academic success.

Students' academic talents can carry them far, but in order to become scholars who can manage their own learning, students need to be self-motivated, engaged and disciplined. According to a recent ACT report, the strongest predictor of academic success, aside from prior academic achievement, is academic discipline, which the authors define as the "skill component of motivation" and is exhibited in the amount and quality of effort students devote to schoolwork and the degree to which students engage in learning new things (College Board, 2012).

Most African-American students recognize the importance of graduating from high school and expect to go to college. When students believe college is necessary for their long term goals, they are more likely to take challenging classes in middle school and high school, work harder in those classes and be more successful in both high school and college (Colangelo & Davis, 1997). Just as intelligence is not fixed, neither is a student's belief about his own capabilities. It is, and should be a goal of to develop students' academic self-concept, educational aspirations, motivation and academic discipline, as these are all factors that support students' academic success. African-

American students who are successful in high school are surrounded by and connected to supportive adults, teachers and peers. They have friends who all share a common goal of academic excellence and seek college success. They set high expectations and believe in their ability to meet them. Whether they take AP courses or not, there are African-American students who model commitment, hard work and excellence.

Conclusions and Implications

A review of the literature and pertinent research studies demonstrate that the single most important predictor of students' post-secondary school achievement is their enrollment in and completion of rigorous academic course work during their high school tenure. The scope of AP courses must be broadened in order to provide equal access for all students. It has been proven that students who participate in AP courses have higher grade point averages because of weighted grades, receive a more challenging education, form a close-knit community of friends, gain admission to more prestigious colleges, save money on tuition in college, and have a better chance of completing college successfully (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). The exclusion of more students from the AP program will deny them these benefits and will only further widen the achievement gap that is plaguing this county's educational system (Ford, et. al., 2008). It is documented that educators who have high expectations for students and provide them with challenging and relevant curriculum have facilitated improvements in student performance and increases in student achievement. It is positive and encouraging that these particular factors are all school-related and to a great degree under the control or influence of school personnel. Educators are able to and can communicate high expectations to students and make the sound and appropriate decisions to feature rigorous

course offerings for all students, majority and minority, in their schools. Throughout its 50 year tenure, the AP Program has been one successful intervention that allows school communities to feature a rigorous curriculum and enables students to access academic and motivating instructional courses. The AP courses support individuals in further developing their learning strategies, academic and critical thinking skills. These academic courses and related exams assist high school students in building strong academic foundations, while allowing them to earn college credit and supporting them in successfully transitioning to post-secondary educational studies.

The AP Program has also shown great promise in the past few years in that many schools have added and expanded their selection of AP courses in the curriculum. This has enabled a larger number of students with varied interests and learning profiles to enroll and participate in these courses. Various schools across the country have also made efforts to implement programs and initiatives to increase their enrollments in these classes. The College Board has provided extensive information, publications, and resources to schools that participate in their programs. This organization has also offered extensive professional development training opportunities for school personnel that include various national, state and local conferences, workshops, and summer institutes activities. The AP Program has been a catalyst to strengthen the alignment of curriculum and learning experiences for students across middle school, high school, and higher education institutions. The College Board's initiatives have facilitated schools' efforts to improve and expand their overall curriculum and instructional programs as well as the professional skills of their personnel.

While the AP Program has met an academic standard, it has not yet met the equity standard. Unfortunately, a great concern is that there continues to be discrepancies in the majority and minority student enrollments in these courses. Minority students, as well as many students in rural areas, are not given access to or are not able to enroll in the courses due to restrictive admissions policies, lack of available course offerings, and insufficient information and a lack of academic planning being provided to students and families. This lack of access or availability also contributes to the continued "minority achievement gap" that exists in our nation's schools. Too many students are being denied opportunities that can strengthen their educational foundation, facilitate their success, and provide pivotal educational experiences for them. In addition, school personnel often believe that student minority enrollment recruitment isn't part of their responsibility or they feel inadequate in possessing the skills or expertise to complete the responsibilities. As the racial/ethnic demographics of America's classrooms continue to shift, major initiatives must be enacted to build schools' capacities to offer AP courses to the steadily diversifying student population" (Ford, 2012). In order to alleviate this gap, school systems must work together to identify all high-achieving students at an early age so that they will be a part of the program, not apart from it.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Qualitative Research

Qualitative Research methodology was utilized for this study. According to

Merriam (1998) qualitative research is defined by five characteristics. Researchers who

employ qualitative research focus on what meaning participants have constructed about

"their world and the experiences they have in their world" (p.6). Hence, an

understanding of the phenomenon such as processes, events, persons, or things of interest

to the researcher is interpreted from the perspective of the participants and not the

researcher (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2002). A second feature of qualitative research is that the

researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). As

a human instrument, the researcher responds to the context of the phenomenon, adapts

the research techniques to fit the circumstances, it is sensitive to nonverbal cues,

processes data immediately, and clarifies and summarizes data as the study evolves

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research involves fieldwork; the researcher

observes behavior in its natural setting and as a result must physically go to the people

(Merriam, 1998). The fourth characteristic is that it "primarily employs inductive

research strategy" (Merriam, 1998, p.7). In describing the fifth characteristic, Merriam

(1998), states that the product of this research is richly descriptive; the phenomenon is depicted by words and pictures rather than by numbers. The qualitative approach with a single case study allows for an in-depth and detailed inquiry of this specified topic of interest. Strauss and Corbin (1990) emphasize that qualitative research involves exploration, discovery and inductive logic of an identified phenomenon. Qualitative inquiry focuses on process, description, understanding, and interpretation (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The phenomenological approach places emphasis on understanding the meaning events have for persons being studied (Patton, 1990). This type of research highlights real life by collecting data in specified situations and environments.

Case Study Research Design

The single case study was the specific qualitative design for this research. A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit (Merriam, 1998). The strength of the case study is the ability to examine a case in-depth and within its real-life context (Yin, 1994). A case can be viewed as an object of study (Stake, 1995) as well as seen as a type of methodology (Merriam, 1988). The case study explores a "bounded system" over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of rich, contextual information (Creswell, 1994). The case study provides a rich, thick description of the phenomenon being examined. Yin (1994) emphasizes that case study is a design particularly suited to situations where it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variable from the context. It can however highlight the interaction of factors that are identified in the particular case. "Case study aims to uncover the interactions of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon"

(Merriam, 1988). As noted by Stake (1995), case studies can provide insights into how things develop and get to be the way they are presently. In addition, what were previously unknown relationships and variables can emerge in case studies that in turn leads to a rethinking of the phenomenon being examined. Case study research is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of educational phenomena (Stake, 1995, p. 2). It can also reaffirm what is known, facilitate or expand understanding, or discover new connections and meaning of the phenomena. Generalizations, concepts, and hypothesis can emerge from an extensive analysis of the data that is grounded in the context of the case studies. Such insights into aspects of educational practice can have a direct influence on policy, practice, and future research. By examining educational issues, knowledge and understanding can influence and improve the educational process. As noted by Yin (1994), the "how" and "why" questions are appropriate for and can be answered by a case study research design.   Creswell (1994) emphasizes that it is the "what" and "how" questions that relate to and can be answered by case studies.

There are several strong reasons I selected a qualitative inquiry for this specific research. One compelling reason is that this current and relevant topic of recruiting and enrolling African-American students in AP courses need to be explored. The "what" and "how" research questions helped frame the study to uncover how individuals, policies, procedures, interventions, programs, and services have been identified and utilized to increase African-American students in these academic courses. This case study research provided a holistic, intensive, and thorough description and interpretation of this contemporary educational phenomenon in a designated school.

I took a qualitative approach in this case study with the intention of using authentic African-American student voices to look for commonalities and differences between those students who choose the rigorous advanced track and those who do not. Approaching my research from both an interpretive and a critical stance, I chose to examine closely the decisions of six diverse African American students, allowing each of these smaller cases to inform the larger case.   I also took into account the opinions, beliefs and protocols that members of the guidance department and AP teaching staff used. These specific staff members participated in focus group sessions.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks that will inform my research are social constructivism theory and the critical race theory. Critical and social constructivism theories for understanding the underachievement of African-American students, center on analysis of ideological, racial, and socioeconomic inequities in society and the relationship of societal inequities on student achievement. Proponents of this perspective argue that social inequities, which may in part be attributable to deficit-based ideologies, work to create and sustain a status quo in which the ideas and economic prosperity of particular groups is privileged at the expense of others.   Cognitive psychologist, Lev Vygotsky placed more emphasis on the social context of learning. For Vygotsky, the culture gives the child the cognitive tools needed for development. The type and quality of those tools determines, to a much greater extent than they do in Piaget's theory, the pattern and rate of development. Adults such as parents and teachers are conduits for the tools of the culture. The tools the culture provides a child include cultural history, social context, and

language. It argues that students can, with help from adults or children who are more advanced, master concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own.

Operating in a dialectical relationship, social conditions established outside of schools reinforce people's world views and norms, are reproduced in schools, and continue to support the existing status quo. Inequities in society reproduced in schools implicitly contribute to differential outcomes as evidenced by the academic achievement gap among students from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. Underlying this perspective is an assumption that schools cannot address the underachievement of African-American students without redress of broader ideological, racial, and socioeconomic inequality that exist in society. According to Anyon (1997), educational reform and social reform go hand in hand. Much of the literature that suggests that socioeconomic inequity contributes to educational disparities between students from different social class positions and racial or ethnic backgrounds is based in critical theory.

According to critical theorists, ideological hegemony is created by dominant groups as part of a greater effort to maintain the status quo. The power of dominant groups is maintained through the endorsement and reinforcement of oppressive ideological practices (McLaren, 2003). Schools are not neutral spaces but are actually political in nature and serve the interests of dominant groups, or those who benefit from the status quo (Freire & Macedo, 1987). As sites of social reproduction, school policies and practices reproduce societal inequalities and legitimate dominant norms through the socialization of students. Empirical studies support this critical theory perspective. One practice in particular that has been shown to contribute to social reproduction in schools is "tracking," or the sorting of students by ability. In a national study of secondary school

tracking, Oakes (1985) found that learning in low tracks rarely consisted of the development of skills requisite for moving into higher tracks and instead ensured that students would remain in those low tracks. Twenty years later, Carbonaro (2005) found that higher track classes were characterized by higher quality instruction which leads to greater learning outcomes for the students in them.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) builds on critical theory by emphasizing the significance of race and racism in discussions of African-American student's underachievement. CRT is a counter-discourse generated by legal scholars of color as a race-based critique of law and society (Lynn, 1999). Critical race theorists in the mid-1980s criticized the racialized nature of the law and the ways in which it seemed to privilege non-minorities. By the 1990s, education scholars began to use CRT to explain inequalities in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1997).

While the CRT foregrounds race in an analysis of educational inequality, others who work out of critical theory traditions emphasize the role of social class. One such scholar is Richard Rothstein (2004). In *Class and Schools (2004)*, Rothstein considered the ways in which social and economic manifestations of children's class position had implications for learning in schools. In contrast to deficit perspectives, Rothstein suggests that in a society characterized by extreme social stratification where some people have access to more resources and are afforded greater opportunities regarding high quality education, educational researchers and reformers should not ignore how social class may influence learning in school.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, there is an emphasis on "human as instrument" (Patton, 2000). The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Yin (1994) emphasizes that the case study investigator must possess certain key skills in order to conduct sound and successful research. The researcher must be a good communicator who establishes rapport with participants, asks good questions, listens intently, interprets, answers, and is sensitive to the individuals, physical setting, and context of the study. The researcher must have a firm grasp and knowledge of the issues being studied. This researcher must also be adaptive and flexible so that new situations and information can be seen or related to as opportunities and not threats or problems. The researcher should discuss what is important to the interviewees, within the broad bound of the interview topics and questions and pursue these new discoveries in the interview (Maykut &Morehouse, 1994).

Humans are able to be observant and responsive to environmental cues, interact with the situation, perceive situations holistically, collect information at multiple levels simultaneously, process data when they become available, provide immediate feedback, request verification of data and explore atypical or unexpected responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the use of these human talents and skills, the researcher in the case study is able to gain a more accurate and descriptive picture of the world of others. As noted by Rossman and Rallis (2008), the qualitative researcher must systematically reflect on who they are in the inquiry while being sensitive to their personal biography and how it shapes the study. The researcher is both the collector and interpreter of the data. My own life history influenced my collection of, interaction with, and analysis of

this research data. The professional experiences I have had for six years as a teacher and twenty years as an administrator in diverse high schools, has influenced my belief in the opportunities and benefits of AP Programs for all students, especially African-American students. My varied and extensive experiences in working with students, staff, and families have strengthened my knowledge of curriculum, data collection, and analysis skills relating to AP program initiatives and strategies for increasing minority student enrollment in. I have also had vast experience in observing students and staff and thus have developed my observation and reporting skills. I have participated in interviewing various candidates for multiple positions in the school and that has allowed me to focus on my interviewing skills over the course of the last several years. In addition, I have many experiences in accessing and analyzing individual school and district data and documents.   All of these professional opportunities have allowed me to further develop the outlined skills that assisted and supported me in researching this topic of recruiting, enrolling and retaining African-American students in AP courses in high schools.

Research has its biases, but there are ways to deal with researcher or investigator bias in qualitative research. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), "The best cure for biases is to be aware how they slant and shape what they hear, how they interface with our reproduction of the speaker's reality, and how they transfigure truth into falsity" (p. 148). The researcher must also be nonjudgmental and respectful of the respondents. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note that "while the interviewer is the expert in asking the questions, the respondent is the expert as far as answers are concerned" (p. 142).

Yin (1994) emphasizes that the case study investigator must be unbiased by preconceived notions or opinions and should be sensitive and responsive to different

types of evidence or contradictory information. Investigators must have skills and expertise in pursuant of a particular line of inquiry while at the same time collecting data.

Site Selection

The site for this investigation was a large suburban high school located in Cleveland, Ohio. The high school served a student population of approximately 1,800 students in grades 9 – 12. The racial composition of the student body was approximately 85% African-American, 12% White, and 3% other (foreign-exchange students). Roughly 24% of the student body was low income, the daily attendance rate was approximately 93% and graduation rate was 85%. The selection of this school was made because the school has 19 AP programs and a relatively larger population of graduating African-American students goes to college. Despite this reported school district trend of increased post-secondary experiences, and high achievement in general education courses, there was a gap in AP participation. There seemed to be challenges in recruiting and supporting the achievement of African-American students in AP courses, while continuing to place the same academic accountability demands on them.

The Advanced Placement Program

Rigorous advanced academic studies are offered through the AP Program. Providing all students with strong and rigorous academic programs has been a long term goal of the school system and increasing minority achievement as well as student enrollment in AP courses have been district strategic targets for the past six years.

The AP Program offers an extensive curriculum and variety of academic courses. They include the following: AP English Language & Composition; AP English Literature & Composition; AP United States History; AP United States Government & Politics, AP

Psychology; AP Biology; AP Chemistry; AP Physics B and C; AP Environmental Science; AP Calculus AB and BC; AP Statistics; AP Spanish; and AP French. The types of courses and number of sections are dependent on student course enrollments for each school year.

Participants

The participants for this study were African-American high school seniors of mixed genders whose grades and grade point averages indicated they were high achievers. Students were contacted in school by the researcher to judge their desire in being a part of this study, and if they were interested, both students and parents signed the provided consent form.

Six seniors agreed to participate. Interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes. In addition to students, there were focus groups facilitated with teachers and guidance counselors. Teacher participants were of mixed genders and from different content and grade areas and levels of experience. Guidance counselor participants were those who deal directly with seniors who are eligible to take AP courses. Focus group facilitation ranged in length from 60 – 120 minutes. For this specific case study purposeful sampling was used. According to Patton (1990), the researcher can identify the extreme, exemplary or ideal sample or case prior to or in the early stages of the research. Purposeful sampling seeks information-rich cases which can be studied in-depth. The goal of the study was to develop better understandings of the processes and programs aimed at increasing African-American students' participation and successes in AP courses, so criteria was purposeful in order to develop the pool of seniors.

Qualitative researchers set out to build a sample and gain a deep understanding of some phenomenon experienced by a carefully selected group of people or by individuals in a particular environment (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Since I sought to discover relevant and pertinent information about the identified topic, the individual school site selected for the case study was based on criteria relating to the schools' population of high-achieving African-American students and the number of AP courses offered in the high school.

Gathering/Instrumentation

In situations where little is known, it is often better to start with qualitative methods – interviews and focus groups. Interviews can take the form of dialogue or interaction and allow the researcher "to understand and put into larger context the interpersonal, social, and cultural aspects of the environment" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews enable the researcher and the respondent to "reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future" (p. 273).

Methods included structured interviews with the six students and focus group discussions with groups of teachers and the school guidance counselors. In addition, I examined student data, recruitment and retention data related to African American students, and registration and enrollment policies. Through cross-case analysis, a number of external and internal themes emerged, each of which could pose a barrier or a support, depending on the student and the particular circumstances. External themes included tracking, rigor, peer pressure, teacher involvement, and parental involvement. Internal themes included know-how, identity, and drive.

Student Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with the six students. All of the interviews lasted between about 60 minutes and were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Focus groups are a data collection method. Data was collected through a semi-structured group interview process moderated by a group leader, one of the counselors. There was a standardization of questions that was facilitated in a structured protocol. Note taking was important to capture nonverbal data in focus groups. Two advantages of this data collection were that there was an ability to produce a large amount of data on a topic in a short time and there was access to comparisons that participants made between their experiences. This was very valuable and provided access to both a consensus and diversity of experiences on the topic of AP courses. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with respondents.

The purpose of the interview was to access the perspective of the person or persons being interviewed (Patton, 1990). This type of interviewing allowed the researcher to obtain specific information from each individual while still allowing for further exploration and discussion of the topic (Creswell, 1994). This structure allowed participants to express their thoughts, observations, opinions, perspective and ideas on the topic while also sharing information about the specific actions, events, processes, and procedures about the phenomena. This interview also allowed for "continuous assessment and evaluation of information by the inquirer, allowing them to redirect, probe, and summarize" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The review of the literature and the information retrieved and analyzed from the pilot and practice interviews provided focus for further development and refinement of

the interviewing guides or protocols that were used for this case study. As noted by Yin (1994), Experienced investigators review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic. The protocol included the questions to be asked of respondents as well as the procedures to be followed. "The protocol is a major tactic in increasing the reliability or dependability of case study research and is intended to guide the investigator in carrying out the case study" (Yin, 1994, p. 92).

As the researcher, I used one device to record all interviews so as to ensure that all information was retrieved for transcribing and analysis. Notes were taken during each interview to record thoughts, reactions, or observations as well as to facilitate the pacing of the interviews. I also kept a journal and recorded information following each interview. This allowed the researcher to record reflections and observations as well as descriptive notes on the behavior of the participants. By taking post-interview notes, I was also able to monitor the process of data collection as well as begin to analyze the information itself (Merriam, 1988). By maintaining a record of interviews, the researcher began an "audit trail" of their work, which contributed to the trustworthiness of the research outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Observations of Focus Groups

Observation requires researchers to be in the natural setting where the phenomenon under study takes place. The purpose of observation was for the researcher to be capable of understanding and reporting about the program, setting, and participants as an insider while also describing and communicating about the phenomena for outside readers (Patton, 1990). Through observation, the researcher described and documented actions and interactions. The researcher looked at broad areas of interest and then

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discovered the recurring patterns of behavior, connections, and relationships. "Case study research begins with data collection and builds themes, categories, and propositions from relationships among the data" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Observation can lead to deeper understanding than interviewing alone as it provides knowledge of context in which the phenomenon or events occur and may enable the researcher to see things that participants are not aware of or that they are unwilling or unable to discuss or explain (Patton, 1990).

This researcher also designed an observational protocol as a method of recording notes in the field (Creswell, 1998). The protocol included both descriptive and reflective notes. The qualitative field notes contained what is seen and heard by the researcher, without interpretation. Observation data provided information relevant to the research questions and was used to verify other collected data.

Focus groups share many common features with less structured interviews, but there is more to them than merely collecting similar data from many participants at once. A focus group is a group discussion on a particular topic organized for research purposes. This discussion was be guided, monitored and recorded by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data is a process that occurs and interacts with data collection (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).   Data collection allowed me to adjust strategies used in the observations and in the interviews. This coding process is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as "operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding" (p. 58). During open coding, all of the data included in the interviews, field notes and documents

was examined and categorized.   The NVivo software was used to help organize and draw links between ideas and concepts, which allowed me to develop theories. NVivo is a technical tool designed for qualitative analysis and mixed methods research offering tools to help the researcher deeply analyze unstructured data.

NVivo doesn't favor a particular methodology—it's designed to facilitate common qualitative techniques no matter what method you use. It will help me to manage, explore and find patterns or categories in the data.   Specific categories can include situational factors such as who, what, when, and where. Categories can also represent emerging themes or concepts. Developing categories is largely an intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose, the investigating orientation and knowledge and the constructs made explicit by the participants of the study (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).   Strategies such as counting, pattern and theme identification, clustering, identifying relationships between variables, building logical chains of evidence, and making concepts coherent can all be used as methods to organize and convey meaningful information to the reader. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest other analytical techniques such as making a matrix of categories and placing the evidence within each category, creating data displays such as flowcharts and other devices to examine data, tabulating the frequency of different events, putting information in chronological order, or using some other temporal scheme to facilitate the organization and analysis of data. From these intuitive approaches, insights and explanations are likely to emerge. Incidents, events and ideas with similar phenomena was given the same name (p. 63). During the process of axial coding, the categories were compared to determine the relationships among them. This process resulted in the identification of

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core categories, which was an element of selective coding to help determine the patterns of the data.

The goal of qualitative research was to discover patterns which emerged after close observation, careful documentation, and focused analysis of the research topic (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Qualitative research involves inductive data analysis procedures that emerge early and are ongoing as the research develops and continues. The final product of a case study is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process (Merriam, 1988). Information must be organized so that intensive analysis can occur. Interview transcripts, field notes, reports, and documents need to be organized. Yin (1994) refers to this organized material as the case study database while Patton (1990) refers to the material as the case record. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest unitizing the data. The data was divided into identified units of information that became defined categories. Most of this occurred through transcription and the use of NVivo. Transcription involved close observation of data through repeated careful listening and watching, and this was an important first step in data analysis. This familiarity with data and attention to what is actually there rather than what is expected helped facilitate realizations and ideas which emerged during analysis. Qualitative analysis takes skill and creativity. It requires placing the raw data into logical, meaningful categories to examine them holistically and to communicate interpretation to others (Patton, 1990). This researcher compiled data from the interviews, observations and documents accessed and reviewed and then utilized the outlined procedures to analyze the data. The main concepts identified in the literature review

provided a framework and new concepts were identified following the analysis of the data collected for this research study.

Stake (1995) highlights various forms of data analysis and interpretation in case study research. Categorical aggregation involves the researcher seeking a collection of instances from the data, examining the information and seeking to identify issue-relevant meaning from the data. In direct interpretation, the researcher seeks to establish patterns and looks for a correspondence between two or more categories. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that in the final interpretive phase, the researcher reports the "lessons learned" from the case. A final strategy is naturalistic generalization which allows the researcher to analyze the data and then generalize that people can learn from the identified case or apply it to a population of cases (Creswell, 1994).

A qualitative study of this nature "must demonstrate its truth value, provide a basis for applying it and allow for external judgments to be made about the consistency of its procedures and neutrality of its findings or decisions" (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify these qualities as "trustworthiness" (p. 290). The checks and balances inherent in all of these outlined data collection and analysis strategies have increased the rigor and trustworthiness of this case study.

Dependability

There are various strategies that the researcher can use to ensure that the case study results are dependable. Good case studies utilize multiple sources of evidence. In collecting case study data, the main idea was to triangulate or establish converging lines of evidence to make the findings as robust as possible (Yin, 1994). Triangulation - the

use of multiple methods of data collection and analysis - can and did strengthen the case study findings and conclusions.

The use of an audit trail can also facilitate the dependability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The investigator must record how data is being collected, categories are identified, and decisions made throughout the inquiry. Identified peer reviewers can then examine the process and product of the research consistency. "Essentially researchers should present their methods in such detail so that other researchers can use the original report as an operating manual by which to replicate the study" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The identified peer reviewer will be able to follow the procedures, outcomes, and results of the study.

Thus, a case study database and protocol increases the reliability or dependability of the entire case study. Information in the database should include interview, observation and document analysis notes as well as other pertinent documents, tabular materials and narratives. Developing and utilizing a specified protocol allowed this researcher to have a designated model to follow while also providing documentation of the research procedures. It also will allow a reader an organized guide to follow when reviewing the research.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Chapter IV contains information related to the results of the data analysis. The interviews and focus feedback and responses were transcribed, later verified by students, guidance counselors and teachers for accurate transcription. The information was then entered into NVivo to determine emerging themes. That data was coded and organized into categories. The data helped explain the beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and perceptions of African-American seniors and of the guidance counselors and teachers who work directly with the seniors.

The purpose of this study was to determine how teachers and guidance counselors contribute to Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Information gleaned through student interviews will be useful to guidance counselors as they engage in course scheduling in the future. Teachers of AP classes will benefit by knowing the factors that cause students to, or not to enroll in AP classes and to identify solutions to help students to persist in the classes until the conclusion. At this large urban high school, 19 AP courses are offered. African-American students make up 76 percent of the total population and 56 percent of African-American students pursue post-secondary studies at two-year and four-year colleges or universities. While the school is diverse, this diverse population is not

reflected in the AP program where the population of those AP courses remains filled with predominately White students – approximately 91 percent. Therefore, while the school's population, along with the surrounding city's population, continues to become more diverse each year, the AP populace is not changing to reflect the current school and city.

Since the study deals with choices made by high school students with direction and recommendations from their guidance counselors and teachers, hearing their voices was essential; therefore, a case study was used in order to capture the essence of this research. Case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Case study research provides a holistic, intensive, and thorough description and interpretation of this contemporary educational phenomenon in a designated school. Case studies tend to be selective, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined. They are multi-perspectival analyses. This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the students, but also of the relevant groups of teachers and guidance counselors and the interaction between them.

The interview process allows for "continuous assessment and evaluation of information by the inquirer, allowing them to redirect, probe, and summarize" (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The review of the literature and the information retrieved and analyzed from the pilot or practice interviews also provided focus for further development and refinement of the interviewing guides or protocols that were used for this case study. As noted by Yin (1994), experienced investigators review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful questions about the topic. The protocol includes the questions to be asked of respondents as well as the procedures to be followed. "The

protocol is a major tactic in increasing the reliability or dependability of case study research and is intended to guide the investigator in carrying out the case study" (Yin, 1994, p. 15). These interviews and focus group discussions allowed the researcher to collect interview data from various sources. It also allowed for triangulation of the data and thus increased reliability (i.e., dependability) and validity (i.e., credibility) of the research (Merriam, 1988).

Stake (1995) highlights various forms of data analysis and interpretation in case study research. Categorical aggregation involves the researcher seeking a collection of instances from the data, examining the information and seeking to identify issue-relevant meaning from the data. In direct interpretation, the researcher seeks to establish patterns and looks for a correlation between two or more categories. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note in the final interpretive phase of research, that the researcher reports the "lessons learned" from the case. A final strategy is naturalistic generalization which allows the researcher to analyze the data and then generalize that people can learn from the identified case or apply it to a population of cases (Creswell, 1994).

Research Questions

The study was designed to determine why African-American students who have the potential to be successful in AP classes are choosing not to participate in the classes and to create strategies to recruit and retain them. The research questions used to guide this study related to (a) how school policies and procedures impact African-American student enrollment in AP courses; (b) the perceptions and experiences of teachers, guidance counselors and the students about the processes; (c) the extent to which the

schools support the academic achievement of these students; and (d) the academic and social challenges these students face.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of six students, three guidance counselors and three teachers.   When considering teachers for inclusion in the study, the sole requirement was that the teacher must have taught AP. The guidance counselors selected have all dealt with scheduling seniors for AP classes. All of the students were African-American seniors who were eighteen years of age. An invitation was mailed to all 18-year-old African American seniors and the first six students who agreed to participate were selected.

Informed consent letters were signed and completed by all six. Some of them take or have taken AP classes or were on the AP Potential list provided and prepared by the teachers and guidance counselors. All of the students had also been on the list arranged by the College Board. The College Board list provides the names of students who are predicted to experience success in AP classes based on their high PSAT scores. AP Potential is a "free, web-based tool that allows schools to generate rosters of students who are likely to score a 3 or higher on a given AP Exam; AP Potential is designed to help schools increase access to AP and to ensure that no student who has the chance of succeeding in AP is overlooked" (College Board, 2012).   Those six participants included three males and three females. Student profiles are included, but all were given code numbers for privacy.

Participant 01 was a female who has never taken an AP course. She had predicted AP potential in the subject area of English Language, English Literature and

Government. Participant 02 was a female who took one AP course during her junior year. She had predicted AP potential in the areas of Calculus AB, Chemistry and Physics. Participant 03 was a female who takes AP courses. She had successfully earned credits in AP Biology, AP English Language, AP Spanish and AP Government.

Participant 04 was a male who has never taken AP courses. He did take some honors courses in the past, and he had predicted AP potential in twenty-five of the thirty-three subject areas. Participant 05 was a male who has taken AP courses. During his junior year, he successfully earned credits in AP English Language, AP Music Theory, and AP Psychology. He is currently taking AP English Literature and AP Statistics. Participant 06 was a male who is taking his first AP course.   He is currently scheduled in AP U.S. History, and has predicted AP potential in ten subject areas.

The guidance counselors (G1, G2 and G3) who participated in the focus groups were of different races, gender and years of experience. All three work with seniors who take or have the potential to take AP classes. Participant G1 was an African-American male who has been at the school for all of his thirty-one years. He considered test scores, student academic history and parent desires when scheduling students. Participant G2 was an African-American female who graduated from this high school. She was targeted in high school as having potential, but did not take AP classes. She admitted to allowing students, parents and teachers to take the lead in AP recommendations and when scheduling students. Participant G3 was a Caucasian male who has worked in one other school district. He spends a lot of time talking to students about their likes and dislikes. He encourages students to take higher levels in the courses they are interested in.

Teachers (T11, T22 and T33) who participated in the focus group have all taught AP courses. They are of varied race, gender and years of service. Participant T11 was an African-American female who has taught for seven years. She teaches one AP courses and although she doesn't have the years of experience, she has a Master's degree in the subject area that she teaches. Participant T22 was a Caucasian female who has taught for over twenty-five years. She teaches all of the AP classes in one of the core subject areas. She is known as the "AP teacher" and has a reputation of challenging students. Participant T33 was a Caucasian male who has taught eighteen years. He teaches an AP course every year. He relies heavily on his and the recommendation of certain colleagues. Students are known to drop his AP class.

Analysis of Data Collected

Qualitative data was used to answer the research questions. Interviews with students and the guidance and teacher focus groups were transcribed and coded to provide insight on the feelings, experiences and protocol as they relate to the AP program. An understanding of the behaviors of African-American students at this particular school to measure ideas and opinions was also sought. The interview questions encouraged students to express how they feel about their academic decisions, specifically as those decisions relate to enrolling or not in an AP course, and if those decisions were a result of influence from their peers, teachers and/or their school. Since qualitative data is about the subjects' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) each individual student perspective on interactions with peers, teachers, school and how academic choices were influenced contributed to the overall picture of the underrepresentation issue.

Responses

In their responses, all six seniors did provide insight into future plans, people with whom they share academic goals, how their elementary and middle school identified them, and their ideas and definitions of success and the equity factor of the AP program. For example, the seniors were unanimous on college aspirations (Question 6), with all participants stating they were going to college. Not all thought that AP classes increased their chances for college admission, and three had never been told that AP guarantees them a spot on a college roster.

Question 1.

What outside factors would enter into your decision whether or not to take the class?

Participants 02, 03, 05, and 06 discussed the desire to be intellectually challenged as a reason for enrolling in an AP class. They aligned the AP class to a college class, and want to see how they would fare. "A lot of the stuff in regular classes is just repeating information I already know, which makes me a little bored" (P06).

If taking AP courses was a factor for the college that they planned on attending, they might enroll in AP courses. Therefore, colleges that do not offer AP credit or reward applicants who have taken AP courses are intentionally inviting students who did not have AP on their transcripts to apply. Ironically these colleges are also unintentionally disinviting students from considering enrollment in AP courses.

Question 2.

What will your parents say if you take an AP class?

Interestingly enough, five of the six had a family member, in their current household, who had attended college and for at least four of the five, it was an older sibling who had taken one or more AP courses. This context is not necessarily indicative of how their thoughts on college came to be, but it is noteworthy, especially given that all six had expressed that they discussed their academic plans and career goals with their parents. A good example of a parent knowingly steering a child into an AP course was evident from the individual interview with P05.

I talked to my mother about being a therapist. I was in counseling when I was younger and it helped me a lot. So I want to do the same thing with other children. AP Psychology fit with my future line of work (P05).

Question 3.

Describe the AP student.   Does your description of start in the K-8 school years?

Another concept essential to continued growth of African-American students in AP classrooms is the early identification of many of the students as qualifying for gifted services or advanced content classrooms. Both of these acts are driven by the feeder schools of this high school. Three of the six participants had been identified as gifted in elementary school, which should account for high school academic plans and AP enrollment once in high school. In addition, all six of the seniors took advanced classes in middle school where some of teachers had AP discussions as well.   This middle school course enrollment followed the pattern that the same six should have transitioned to all AP classes or at least one AP class in high school. These advanced content classes in middle school seem as though they could help high schools identify even more eligible African-American students to enroll in AP prior to the PSAT-AP potential letter which is

mailed to students in the month of January of a student's sophomore year of high school as evidenced by the questionnaire responses of senior P03, who thrived in all of the advanced courses she took.

> Because these were the students that were moving faster than the rest of the grade, it kind of taught me to go and learn the content quickly, to study and be prepared to take a test the next day, which has helped me do what I need to do in AP (P03).

In fact, four seniors who attended the same feeder middle school indicated that their 8th grade teachers spoke to them on a regular basis regarding their high school path, and what the high school teachers would be expecting them to be able to do as freshmen. Depending on the tone and delivery of the teacher, their words could be preparing the students to be active participants in their learning success. If the teacher made the workload or class seem impossible to pass, the students would not be eager or feel confident to take challenging courses. None of the students in the study felt this was the case. Other findings that dealt with the school included that two were unanimous in their perception of the school as offering AP classes that met the interests of students, and three of the six perceived the AP classes as being accessible to all students. Finally, unlike what some of the literature stated as an issue preventing African-American students from enrolling in AP, all six of the students stated that their African-American peers did not have any effect on which AP classes they decide to take or not (Question 9).

One of the seniors revealed that the PSAT - AP Potential letter did not know her as a person and could never influence her course decisions.

It wouldn't have any bearing because I know my standards and I don't think AP is that type of life for me, and I don't like social studies. It is somebody's words on a piece of paper, and they don't know my mind (P01).

This student spoke about data not painting a true picture of her desires as a student and she hoped that the school personnel would tap into this to guide and direct her.

Question 4.

What will your friends say if you take an AP course?

The interview data regarding the students' perceptions of their friends revealed that even though they had friends who discouraged them from enrolling in AP courses, their African-American peers had zero effect in the final decision to actually enroll. In addition, five of the students stated that they could not be influenced by their peers in a final decision to enroll in AP. Yet, all six students stated that their peers' comments were reasons that many other African-American students had been discouraged from AP enrollment. Reasons cited for their friends' discouragement in enrolling included that the AP courses were too strenuous, too hard, and/or too time consuming. These comments were perceived to be as discouraging and inhibiting otherwise capable African-American students from enrolling in AP course.

There are not as many minorities in the class and I think they get discouraged by it, because I think there are a lot of Black students at this school who could take AP classes and do well. They just don't believe in themselves. And I don't know why, because I think that they could (P03).

They were saying (Black peers) that it's a lot of work and on top of the other classes it was just too much. Like when I talked to previous seniors they were saying that they struggled during their senior year and their GPAs dropped because of AP classes (P04).

I think the teachers should actually talk to them, because when they hear from other students, it doesn't sound good. If they listen to what we talk about and the amount of work we complain about, they wouldn't want to take it. If the teacher were to describe it, it would be totally different, because as a senior, we have senioritis and we just complained a lot (P05).

Question 5.

Has a teacher or a counselor ever talked to you about taking an AP course?

During the course selection process, as well as during long-term academic planning, the counselor is the main contact for the student as they discuss goals and determine academic direction. "It really is a group effort but it is the counselor that gives that main piece as the academic advisor" (G1).

The counselors are on the front line with getting the students in classes. "Students and parents appreciate that we are sharing consistent information and are following the same policies and procedures. This helps us with keeping students and families informed and making good decisions. Guidance is key to this process" (G2). "We speak to students individually and promote interest in AP classes and taking the classes as soon as possible. We try to find their areas of interest and where they are strong and capitalize on their strengths" (G3).

In working with students, the counselors also emphasize individuals developing self-advocacy and decision-making skills as students continue to make course selection and career decisions. "We are continuing to work with students and administer a series of lessons focused on students' academic, career and personal/social development to all students" (G3).

> We are working with students on their further development of self-advocacy skills and their active involvement in their learning. We are working with them to seek assistance from teachers and mentors when they have questions and to seek support in refining their critical reading and writing skills (G1).

Question 6.

Would you be more likely to take an AP course next year if you were told that you had been recommended? Why or why not?

The interview data regarding the students' perceptions of their teachers revealed that some of their teachers did play an important factor in their decision to enroll in AP. Many of their teachers encouraged them to challenge themselves and advised them to take 9th and 10th grade honors courses that were staffed by those teachers. In addition, if the students had a positive experience with a teacher in an honors course, they were more likely to take that teacher's AP course in their 11th or 12th grade years. The student responses were consistent with the literature reviewed (Carbonaro, 2005) which indicated that some teacher expectations for African-American students mattered, their support for taking an AP course was needed, and their positive relationships influenced African-American students' decisions to enroll in an AP class.

Last year I took AP U.S. History with Teacher X just because I had him the

previous year and I had a pretty good grade for honors world history. So I had this

good grade in class and he was like OK, you have the grades now you just have to

challenge yourself a little more with AP, so I took it. And then I heard about

Teacher Y that she was a pretty cool teacher, so I took AP Psych as well" (P05).

This same teacher came up in a later interview.

I had Teacher Y and I was deciding on taking regular psychology or AP

Psychology. She said it was a little bit harder, but that I could use it for college. I

told her that I wanted to pursue that career. She said that I could get through it

because I've had her since I've been in 9th grade for the different history classes

she teaches; and she was like you have a good work ethic and I believe that you

can take on the challenge of the class, so she recommended me" (P02).

These positive experiences aside, there was not a beneficial presence of inviting behavior

if the teacher in question had a bad reputation.   Five seniors of the seniors who were

interviewed stated the teacher of the AP course would play a factor in their decision to

enroll and so would a teacher recommendation.   The reasons these seniors would

definitely not take an AP course were the teacher's reputation for assigning busy work,

for not teaching well, or teachers showing doubt in their ability to handle the course load.

Two of the seniors who have taken AP courses believed the support they received from

non-AP courses and staff heightened their tolerance.

Five of the six seniors are enrolled in the AVID program. The AVID program has

been advocated by the College Board as a support program and was created to help

students succeed in AP or honors classes (Becker, 2012). The interviews suggested that

student perceptions of the AVID teachers as supportive, was a popular aspect of AVID (Ford, 2012). Two of the seniors believed the AVID program helped them to stay on top of their classwork and AP coursework and changed their perception of what was needed to succeed in an AP course (Becker, 2012). These seniors, 02 and 05, believed that the AVID teachers purposely directed them to enroll in AP coursework and helped them to have faith in themselves. Although the recommending teacher played a positive role in influencing AP course enrollment, the AVID teacher is not an AP teacher.

There have been recommendations to take AP courses from teachers other than the AVID staff; two of the students discussed the bias on the part of both teachers and guidance counselors recommending students to take advanced courses.

I would like to ask why, how come so many kids get the opportunity to go into AP, and they don't ask them if they want to and they don't ask other kids who have high A's in every class if they want to. I see more White students in there. There are smart people   they don't recognize" (P01).

In the focus group discussion, it was determined that there needed to more frequent conversations between guidance and teaching staff about students and student work instead of relying solely on teacher recommendations and grades for higher level courses. Student achievement talks would help identify every student's academic strengths and potential. The focus group discussion also emphasized that there are teachers who demonstrate their leadership through their commitment to encouraging and inviting students to enroll in AP classes. They know they are an important factor in influencing students to enroll in their courses. "The most important person in this whole process is the teacher of the student and if they really feel and believe that the student

can be successful and they encourage them" (T22). "Our job is to make sure that kids are challenging themselves. That's critical. We must invite and encourage students to take these classes" (T33). "Teachers have a big influence when they are talking with students as they are going through the scheduling process. Teachers are key to selling these classes" (T11).

Along with individual conversations and invitations, the teacher explored and identified other ways to engage students and to entice them into participating in the AP Program. Some teachers visit classes and speak with groups of potential students for their AP courses. "The individual teachers influence course selection a lot. Teachers recruit for their own courses. The AP US History teachers go into the 10th grade honor's classes and talk about AP History for the upcoming year" (G1).

Emerging Themes: Ignore, Obstruct and Delay

Ignoring: Recruitment initiatives. In essence, this study discovered that while the personal experiences of the individual students were quite varied, they all shared common factors that played a vital role in their decisions not to participate in AP courses. The most significant common theme was their lack of information about AP classes. While several of the students said that they had heard that AP classes were "hard," the information did not come from any adult at the school who was knowledgeable about the courses. All of their information came from peers who had either dropped an AP course in the past because it was too "hard" for them or who were basing their knowledge of the classes on hearsay themselves. The students interpreted the word "hard" to mean "more work," and since many of the students interviewed already have stress from school work or work outside of school, they decided AP was not for them, especially during their last

year of high school and especially during the time of high school when transcripts are most important for post-secondary ventures. Students were concerned about upsetting their status quo. Many said they would rather have a "good grade" in a regular class than a bad grade in a good class.

There is a lack of diversity in the few available recruitment materials. This is crucial for students who need to see themselves in these classes. When photos of AP classes are posted on the school website, African-Americans are not represented, so students do not have a chance to see themselves or to envision themselves in AP classes. Students expressed their belief that AP classes are for "smart" people. They felt as if they were not smart enough to take the classes with the "smartest kids." Only two of the students had been told that their name was on the AP Potential list – the others were surprised to discover this news. Four of the six students interviewed said that if they had been told that their name was on the list, they would have taken an AP class. The simple fact that their names were on the list even overrode some students' fear of failure.

I believe it would change my mind about taking advanced classes because I am all about success. If somebody was to bring it to my attention, I would have considered it. Because it was never really offered to me, I never really took the initiative to find out more about it (P04).

The knowledge of their names on the AP Potential list seemed to give the students confidence that they had the ability to take an advanced class and be successful. Therefore, a simple lack of communication may have caused many students to miss out on the education that could be provided to them in advanced educational classes.

Obstruction: Staff support. The students were quite vocal in their opinions about the role of the counselors and teachers in their academic decisions, which fueled the second theme. The students felt that the role of the counselor was to advise students, and none of the students felt that they were adequately advised about course options by their counselors. There was a general consensus of disconnect between the counselors and the students. The overall feeling was that the counselors are just at school to make sure that the students have the courses they need to graduate, but they do not advise students about which courses to take or talk to them about the options of courses on different levels. They said that they rarely even speak to a counselor, and when they do get in to see one, they feel as if they are treated as a student ID number because the counselor sees so many people that she does not get to know any of them personally. All students in the research study indicated that the counselors did not play any role in their selection of classes and that the counselors had never told them that they had the potential to do well in an AP class. The students believed that their academic history determined the classes they were scheduled to take.

Teachers are of critical importance in discovering and encouraging academically talented minority students. Teachers should apply high standards fairly to all students. The teachers said in a number of different ways that the most important attribute of a teacher of minority students is fairness. Equally important is that the students know the teacher is fair. What is meant by fairness to a high school student? Teachers apply rules firmly and consistently by not making excuses for a student's minority status, and maintain high expectations of themselves and of their students, while communicating those expectations clearly. Fair treatment gives students the chance to achieve

excellence. Teacher expectations and perceptions greatly play a role in increasing

minority enrollment in AP classes. When teachers give students the idea that they can be

successful in an AP class, usually that student will take the class. However, the opposite

is also true. When teachers do not believe the student should be in an AP class—for

whatever reason—and the student is made aware of this, the student is more likely to

either drop the class or fail.

> The first day of class in an AP course, the teacher told us that some of us would
>
> not last until the end of the course. Some of us laughed, but some students were
>
> spooked by this and dropped the class. I think the teacher wanted us to think he
>
> was so hard and the work too hard, he sent the message that some of us didn't
>
> belong (P03).

Teachers may have students that are scheduled in on-level courses who tend to be

behavior problems, and never entertain the idea of recommending them to take an AP

class. Perhaps the on-level work is not challenging the student enough to keep his or her

attention and the student could benefit from a more rigorous curriculum. This is the

student who will never be considered for challenging courses solely because of poor and

negative behavior. This is also the student who becomes aware of the low expectations

teachers have. Some of these students might conclude that the teachers are right and learn

to expect less of themselves. Even students who maintain a belief in their own

competence may still feel the pressure of their teachers' stereotypes (Ford, 2012).

Counselors and teachers often use students' backgrounds as an erosion of the standards.

Teachers need to have a solid belief in the minority student's ability to do excellent work

– on every level.

Delay: Outside forces. Socioeconomics, the third emerging theme, also plays a part in the reason for the achievement gap and the low minority enrollment in AP courses. Data shows that students from low-income families perform disproportionately lower in school than students from middle to high-income families. Also students from low-income families often have jobs and work long hours after school to supplement the family's income. As a result, their academic performance often suffers. Students who have after school jobs may devote more time to work than the time needed to excel in an AP class. The students often have to make the decision of importance, with rigorous courses taking a back seat to supplementing the family's income. Some low-income parents are reluctant to allow their child to take AP courses because of the test fees associated with them.

The perception of the focus group was that many African-American parents have different expectations than Caucasian parents. They witness that parents who attended college have those same expectations for their children - regardless of race. Those African-American students who do not have the academic or economic privileges, strive to secure a high school diploma, and do not demonstrate a belief that a college degree is a possibility. Lower economic classes often breed low expectations. Lower expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies, contributing to lower expectations from the student, less-positive attitudes toward school, fewer out-of-school learning opportunities and less parent-child communication about school (Ford, 2012). Retention rates for students hit a high in ninth grade, "when 34 percent of students held back are African-American. Disparities in discipline begin in preschool and continue through every level of schooling. While African-Americans make up 18 percent of students in preschool, they

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account for 42 percent of students with an out-of-school suspension and 48 percent of students with multiple out-of-school suspensions" (College Board, 2012).

African-Americans are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of white students. They make up 16 percent of school enrollment, but account for 32 percent of students who receive in-school suspensions (Ford, 2012). Urban schools that are successful with low-income and racial/ethnic minority students, accept the responsibility of assisting them in the process of reconciling the cultural differences between the different spaces in which they hold membership - i.e., school, community, race, ethnicity, religion (Alson, 2003). Good schools produce students who feel they can present their intellectual selves authentically in a way that does not conflict with the cultural ways that are also important to their social and cultural selves. Good teaching in urban schools is often a function of leveraging trust and relationships to challenge students to meet the high expectations for learning. In this way, extracurricular activities can be utilized as tools to engage students, and these activities should be designed to develop skill sets beyond athletics that create opportunities for youth leadership and civic engagement.

These challenges facing urban school systems have both structural and cultural components. Structural challenges are specific school policies and practices that impede student success or fail to adequately address students' needs. Alternatively, cultural challenges are those policies, practices, and sets of beliefs that contribute to dysfunctional perceptions of students' intellectual abilities—particularly those students who are culturally and linguistically diverse - due to limiting predictors of school achievement (Becker, 2012).

Throughout the interviews and discussions related to school programs and strategies that were created and implemented, both teachers and guidance expressed their beliefs and opinions that more initiatives are needed in order for them to be successful in increasing minority student enrollment in AP courses. The staff identified potentially successful initiatives, tools and techniques that need to be developed by all stakeholders to thoroughly evaluate the programs and services. Some of the tools discussed were participation, data, grades, focused student conversations, and surveys. "We are a work in progress and need to develop more in-depth student and teacher surveys to examine why programs are successful and for which particular students" (T11). "We are continuing to analyze our data and to evaluate AP classes and services" (G3).

The instructional teams have to collaborate to identify how to further measure and evaluate the effectiveness of the AP programs. The school has accredited programs for students, but must continue to analyze how the AP classes can help all students be successful and how the school can further promote the successful elements of the services. The staff expressed their desire to continue to improve their craft and skills in accessing and analyzing various types of student and program data. They know that they must carefully examine and evaluate school initiatives and services as they relate to specific student participation and achievement, as well as to program effectiveness. The staff believed that with this evaluation focus, they can better plan for and serve all of the students and programs.

The District's Vision and Mission

The approved School Board measures detailed specific performance expectations for increasing the number of students enrolled in AP Program courses. The high school

conveys and communicates its desire to be accountable for the academic achievement of all students through all of its planning documents.

The mission states that the District measures academic progress to ensure that all students, regardless of race, poverty, language or disability, will graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary for college and/or employment. With a focus on increasing minority student enrollment in AP Program courses, the high school staff utilizes multiple and varied forms of communication to promote the program and to encourage participation. The leader must communicate a strong belief in the program and a desire for students to enroll in the academic courses through frequent memos and letters to the faculty and the community.   It is also ideal to showcase students who accept the AP challenge and recognize them for their achievement in AP classes.

Even though the AP program was not originally intended to give students an advantage in the college admissions process, today AP courses and tests have become a popular tool for increasing students' chances for admission into competitive colleges and universities (Anyon, 1997).   The way in which colleges and universities award credit to AP students varies from institution to institution (Gamoran, 2000). However, AP courses and test scores can signal a student's exposure to a challenging curriculum and in some colleges and universities can be a ticket to more-advanced courses (Daniels, 2003).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to identify and examine the strategies utilized and implemented by a high school when recruiting, enrolling and retaining African-American students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The design for this case study was based on reviews of the literature, interviews and focus group discussions related to student participation in AP courses. A qualitative approach was taken in this comparative case study with the intention of using authentic voices to look for commonalities and differences between those students who choose the rigorous advanced track and those who do not. Approaching my research from both an interpretive and a critical stance, I chose to examine closely the decisions of six diverse African American students, allowing each of these smaller cases to inform the larger case. The selection process for determining the participant was purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling served to provide in-depth and rich descriptions to better understand the study participant. In addition, two focus group discussions were held to collect information from guidance counselors and AP teachers as part of the data analysis process. The site of the study was a large and diverse Cleveland, Ohio suburban high school. Theoretical frameworks that

informed my research were social constructivism theory and the critical race theory. Critical and social constructivism theories for understanding the underachievement of African-American students, center on analysis of ideological, racial, and socioeconomic inequities in society and the relationship of societal inequities on student achievement.

Research methods included semi-structured interviews with the six students and focus group discussions with groups of teachers and the school guidance counselors. Through cross-case analysis, a number of external and internal themes emerged, each of which could pose a barrier or a support of the research, depending on the student and the particular circumstances. External themes included tracking, rigor, peer pressure, teacher involvement, and parental involvement. Internal themes included knowledge, identity, and drive.

In the research findings, I presented the individual cases, each narrative based on a single student's story of his or her educational journey and decision to enroll or not enroll in honors and AP courses. Then I discussed the internal and external factors that play a role in the decision making process and how understanding the students' motivations may provide important contextual understandings of these decisions. I concluded that external factors have greater influence on students' course-taking decisions, especially teacher and guidance involvement. Educators can use this knowledge to inform and guide their practice for the betterment of students.

Chapter 5 is divided into the following sections:

- Discussion of findings and implications

- Limitations

- Recommendations for future research

1. Conclusion

Findings and Implications

The importance of AP classes cannot be understated. Students who participate in AP classes develop study skills (Alson, 2003) and receive encouragement from an "academically supportive peer group" (Gamoran, 2000). In addition, AP courses have be called the "gateway to academic success" (Rothstein, 2004) since AP students usually score higher on college entrance exams, giving them a competitive edge in the recruiting process (Morris, 2002). These students gain a second edge in college acceptance because nearly one-third of colleges and universities use AP as a criterion to determine not only acceptance into the university but scholarship recipients as well. Once they enroll in colleges, students with an AP background are less likely to drop out of college (College Board, 2012), and they are more likely to graduate from college in the expected time frame (Granthan, 2002). Since it is predicted that nearly two-thirds of the jobs in 2014 will require some college education, but only one-fourth of the population will have a college degree, college success is vital to the success of today's students (College Board, 2012).

Even with the various court decisions and educational policies, African-Americans across America may have been exposed to a more diverse student body, but AP classes remained exclusive through much of the 1970s and into the 1980s (Gamoran, 2000). In fact, there were only 2,768 Black students taking AP courses by the end of 1985, which accounted for just less than one percent of the more than 270,000 AP students (Cross, 2008). While numbers alone cannot give the full picture with regard to tracking, the school within a school concept of advancing Whites into Honors and AP courses, and African-Americans into on-level or special education unintentionally created

underrepresentation (Freeman, 2005). Oakes (2008) also discussed how tracking was

inconsistent with students performing at high academic standards set under No Child Left

Behind. Oakes suggested tracking created educational inequalities, rather than addressing

issues of basic learning differences. Kasten (2013) proposed that tracking created

separate and explicitly unequal classrooms where African-American students were

largely channeled into a basic curriculum and an overwhelming majority of White

students were channeled into academically challenging (honors and AP) classrooms.

According to Kasten, this tracking pattern was more likely to be used in a diverse district

than in a district that was either exclusively Caucasian or African-American (2013).

Others have also suggested that the racial composition of classrooms significantly shapes

how students interact with the intended curriculum versus what is actually taught, which

leads to educational gaps that force African-American students to stay underrepresented

in AP courses due to insufficient background knowledge (Kelly & Price, 2011).

Oakes (2008) went on to state that students of color suffered disproportionately by

being tracked disproportionately into the lowest classes and creating further inequality in

terms of achievement, graduation rates, college acceptance. In response to the criticism of

exclusivity by race, the College Board introduced Equity 2000, which was an educational

reform initiative based on the belief that every student, specifically traditionally

underrepresented students, should be provided the opportunity to take an AP course

(College Board, 2012)

For all students, interactions with peers, teachers, and their school, regardless of

race, affect the total high school experience, and course enrollment. The need to belong,

be accepted, and feel connected to something greater plays a key role in socialization and

in the academic identity and course selections of African-American students considering

Advanced Placement courses (Ford, 2012). As a result, the decision to enroll in an AP

class may be influenced by whether or not an African-American student believes it will

directly impact him or her socially.

Social factors like peer acceptance, teacher relations, and school connection,

affect students' expectations and influence their decision-making, which impacts

enrollment in AP and may contribute to the issue of underrepresentation. Literature on

African-American student academic achievement supports the idea that peers, teachers,

and perceptions of the school are key factors leading to the decision of African-American

students to accept the challenge of AP coursework. Belonging and group presence

assumes that one is able to identify with the various students enrolled in the course.

Social personality is one of the roles of peer influence and helps provide students with

much needed support. This concept also means the student has an appreciation of the

teacher, and believes that the school values and rewards achievement. Therefore, in order

to understand the underrepresentation of African-American students in AP, a study on

student perceptions of their learning experiences should include who supported them or

pushed them to take AP courses, as well as their feelings about their teachers and the

school setting that allowed them to succeed (Cross, 2008). African-American students in

this study shared their AP experiences and discussed their AP perceptions in an effort to

address the issue of underrepresentation.

The categories of peers, teachers, and the school, as determined through an

extensive literature review, reveal under enrollment in AP courses by African-American

students was influenced by the following: a desire to maintain peer acceptance; lack of

teacher guidance into AP courses; and lack of promotion of AP courses as academic choices to African-American students and traditionally underserved populations on the part of schools. African-American students have been celebrated merely for trying a more challenging curricula rather than being held to the same standard as their Caucasian peers. Stanly and Baines described this as an egalitarian view of education and part of public schools' efforts to ensure that all students have the same educational experience but not everyone has the same benefits. In addition, Lichten (2007) suggested that only a small minority of the total high school population were even advanced enough to do college-level work regardless of color, which means that even the top African-American high school seniors were still underrepresented because the actual number of all students capable of handling college level course work was insignificant. Thus, he recommended that rather than being placed in AP courses to erase issues of inequality, exclusivity, and opportunity gaps, the focus for 99 percent of high school students, regardless of race, should have been on preparation for college while in high school.

Yet, with these positives for simply participating in AP courses, has led some institutions such as Yale and Harvard, to announce that a minimum score of 5 be required for college credit for any of the AP exams (College Board, 2012). Thus, as colleges raise their requirements, the push to make AP more equitable and accessible may not be necessary other than to satisfy appearances of equity and access. In fact, highly selective colleges such as Brown and Dartmouth, and several departments at Columbia have stopped giving academic credit for AP scores (College Board, 2010). Stanley and Baines (2010) stated that this one-size-fits-all approach does not take into account that abilities amongst people in general, regardless of race, are not equally distributed; consequently,

the truly gifted students are at a disservice because the teachers lower the standards and do not meet their educational needs. By making AP courses the umbrella for equity and excellence for all students, instead of the select few for whom it was intended, the academically gifted student's learning is dumbed down, and the entire AP process suffers (Sonnert, Tai, & Klopfenstein, 2010).

Numerous studies have illustrated the positive effects of an AP curriculum on students' success in college admittance and completion. Many selective colleges and universities consider grade point averages and AP enrollment when considering applicants. Barriers to AP access currently exist due to school demographics, funding, school practices, and university admission policies. African American and Latino students particularly are underrepresented in AP participation. In 2009 African American students made up 14.50/0 of the graduating students nationwide and only 3.7% of the nationwide successful AP exam population (College Board, 2010).

Research has shown that students who take Honors and AP courses have a greater potential for success in life than those who do not (College Board, 2012). The students will soon be entering a work force that requires more highly trained professionals (Carbonaro, 2005). Students need to learn in high school that taking a more challenging course load while they are still in school may be difficult, but the rewards will be far-reaching. AP classes demand the work ethic, attention to detail, and drive for success that is needed in every area of the work force. AP classes help students get into college, and they help them get more scholarships. AP credits allow students to complete college at a more rapid pace, saving them both time and money. The effects of AP classes will benefit the students in many ways, but the students will never know the effects unless

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they participate in advanced classes. Students in this study felt that they were not given enough knowledge, especially about their own potential, to make a change to a more advanced curriculum. The students want encouragement from all of the adults in their world. Perhaps this study can help open the doors to AP classes to more students, giving them a head start on their futures. Students look up to teachers. They look to them for guidance, for knowledge, and for the encouragement they need to be successful in school. In most cases, the participants in this study had nothing negative to say about the teachers in the school. They said that their teachers give them the information they need to pass the class, but two of the six students who have recognized potential to be successful in AP classes have never been approached by a teacher with a suggestion to take a more advanced class. The students did not say that the teachers were doing anything to discourage them; however, they did note a lack of encouragement. Students want teachers who genuinely care. Students need to know that someone believes in them before they can believe in themselves. Teachers need to be given the information about the importance of AP courses, and teachers need access to the list of students who have AP potential. This will allow them to seek out the students who have the ability to thrive in an advanced environment and to encourage those students to leave the safety of their current comfort zones. This will set the stage for teachers to help more students to succeed.

For counselors. The students in this study do not see the counselors as having any role in helping them determine their course selections. The students feel that the counselors are trying to do so much that they have no time to learn about the individual students and what they need. In the eyes of the participants, the counselors need to have

time to get to know the students personally and to help them choose the classes that will

be the best fit for them. The role of the counselor has changed over the past few years.

They are in charge of testing administration, graduation requirements, and numerous

other jobs that are key to the students' success, but the students do not see this side of the

job. They want more. Students are looking for someone to guide them, advise them,

counsel them, and encourage them. The role of the counselor may need to be reevaluated

from the perspective of the school system, the school, the counselors, and the students.

For teachers. Students interviewed felt that the school as a whole is doing a

good job in working with students to make sure they graduate on time. All of the students

interviewed were very happy at the school. They felt that academics are stressed. They

mentioned the extra tutoring and the willingness of teachers to help students who are

struggling. None of the students interviewed felt that the school was doing anything to

impede their success. However, they felt that more needs to be done to help those

students who need a push toward excellence, not just those who need a push to pass. The

students in the study made one point very clear – more needs to be done to inform

students about what Honors and AP classes have to offer and to let them know that they

are on the AP Potential list. The students had two main suggestions as to how the school

could inform students about AP classes. Schools could use the weekly homeroom time to

tell students about all of the different classes and the expectations of those classes. This is

more than just reading about school news on a piece of paper – someone must explain

and 'sell' the courses.

Several students mentioned having a meeting at night for students and parents.

The meeting would inform them about the different AP classes available, and all of the

teachers should be there to talk about their classes. When asked if they thought anyone would attend a meeting like this; most students felt that there would be enough interest to warrant having the meeting. However, some students did say that some parents in the community might not feel comfortable, so something must be done to make everyone feel welcome. The students felt that the school must do more to catch those students who are trapped in the middle. Attention is given to those students who need the extra push just to pass their classes, and students who excel in advanced classes are also recognized. They felt that something must be done to encourage those students who have the ability to excel but who are not getting the encouragement to do so. The students are not sure how it can be done, but they know the need is there. The school serves very disparate communities. This research found that the ways the communities look at academic rigor and success are as varied as the communities themselves. However, the students from all communities need to be encouraged to take classes that will enable them to reach their greatest potential.   A change is necessary in both communities, but how can these changes take place?

African-American students are no longer ostracized in the African American community for being successful in academics. Although they may not be ostracized or discouraged, neither are they encouraged to take advanced classes because their families are often unaware of the opportunities available to their children. These are two opposite problems, but the results are still the same – the communities' views on education are keeping many minority students from entering the rigorous classes that will provide them with a solid academic background. This research found that the ways the communities look at academic rigor and success are as varied as the communities themselves.

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However, the students from all communities need to be encouraged to take classes that will enable them to reach their greatest potential.

Limitations

The qualitative case study was used to explore the perceptions and experiences of African-American high school students regarding their underrepresentation in AP classes. There were four limitations encountered during the study.

1. The first limitation was the primary researcher conducting the study is an employee of the school system where the participants were selected. The primary researcher conducting the study did not allow bias to impact the data of the data analysis. The primary researcher was able to accomplish this action through bracketing, which called for the primary researcher to disregard everything known about school system and the participants.

2. The second limitation is the research findings are specifically relevant to African-American high school students who have the academic potential and scores to take AP courses. The strategies discussed to recruit and employ more African-American students into AP courses where designed and tailored for this underrepresented population. Other races were not included in the research study.

3. The third limitation was the research study only included two types of data sources. The interviews limited the type of data collected from the participants to oral descriptions and statements because it did not allow for the participants to be observed working in classrooms. While the structured focus groups provided the participants the opportunity to explain the underrepresentation of

African-American students in AP courses through their own words and experiences, utilizing different forms of data collection, like observations, could provide further insight into the topic.

4. The fact that it was only school researched is the fourth limitation. The study found several reasons why students are not enrolling in Honors and AP classes at this particular school. However, further study within the same school system or within schools with similar cultural and socioeconomic populations should be conducted to see if the same trends are found throughout the system or within other schools.

These limitations are not problems for the study. They just provide information about the scope of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this research study uncovered some themes that shed light on why some students at this school are not taking AP classes, there is still much to be discovered in this area. While the AP Potential component does give a list of students who have the potential to succeed in honors and AP classes, the guidance and teaching staff need to acknowledge and implement an academic plan for students have the potential. A research study is needed to follow up on students who choose to take an Honors or AP course just because their name is on the list. The AP potential list can never provide the full picture of a person, so perhaps the College Board's emphasis on the students with AP potential should include an 'interest in AP' survey immediately following the PSAT. The survey could focus on careers and colleges in which AP courses are a prerequisite. Providing this connection for students would be invaluable and meaningful. The College

Board and AP coordinators should also target those students to prep them to be successful in AP courses. AP summer camps and a mentoring program would be essential to the student's success.

The material to market and to recruit AP students should be as inclusive as possible and should have inclusive imagery from all walks of life —all groups should be represented. This would show that higher level courses are not exclusive to any group of students.

Direct observation is a source of data collection allowing the researcher a close visual inspection of a phenomenon in a natural setting. Direct observation offers contextual data on settings, interactions, and individuals. Direct observation lends itself to cross-checking information. It provides the chance to notice any differences between what the participant states in other forms of data collection such as interviews and what they do (Creswell, 1994).

Conclusion

The review of the literature, research, and results of this case study highlight the importance of educators working together to promote and support minority student participation in the AP Program. District and school personnel established a shared vision, reinforced high expectations for all students, and encouraged them to academically challenge and stretch themselves. The staff members agreed to communicate a clear message that the AP Program is open to all students and they are welcome to access it. Educators committed to actively pursue, invite, and recruit students to participate in the AP courses. They conveyed their beliefs and convictions that their

students would be successful in these academic courses. They also committed to supporting individuals who were enrolled and participating in these courses.

This study examined course-taking decisions among qualified African-American high school students who chose to participate in AP classes and those who opted out of advanced classes. The study was significant in light of the large body of research about the underrepresentation of African American students in advanced courses. This problem has wide implications for addressing educational opportunity gaps. In fact, some researchers assert that underrepresentation of African-American students in advanced classes has lasting negative impacts on both individual students and on society as a whole.

Research discusses many externally and internally generated factors that can influence African American students' academic decisions. External factors include inaccessibility, socioeconomic status, and systemic barriers. Internal factors include cultural identity conflicts, learning style differences, and social isolation. Although researchers as a whole agree that these factors account for the lack of African American representation in advanced levels of high school course work, few have employed the authentic voices of African American students in regards to their academic decisions.

The policy moving into the 2016-2017 school year will call for the high school to disaggregate achievement data by race. This will encourage educators to be attentive to issues of equity and may also contribute to a broader social acceptance of colorblind ideologies. Teachers have assumptions about race and ethnicity that inform their beliefs about students. These preconceptions influence teacher expectations and relationships with students who are culturally different from them. This phenomenon is particularly

important given that the majority of teachers, including AP teachers, are White and that African-American students continue to be under-represented and under-achieving in AP courses. Additionally, high-stakes accountability environments can influence the way teachers interact with students.

AP classes demand the work ethic, attention to detail, and drive for success that is needed in every area of the work force. AP classes help students get into college, and they help them get more scholarships. AP credits allow students to complete college at a more rapid pace, saving them both time and money. The effects of AP classes will benefit the students in many ways, but the students will never know the effects unless they participate in advanced classes.

In the interest of creating equitable educational opportunities for African-American students in secondary schools and supporting their admission to institutions of higher education, it is important to consider the implications of the findings from this study for schools and school districts. To be fair is to be impartial, to play fair is to follow the same rules, and fair-and-square means everything is above-board. Increased opportunities will never produce equal outcomes; individual talents and the capacity for hard work vary too much (Ford, 2012).

While the research into the phenomenon of underrepresentation in AP classes at this school brought to light many points, two main focal points emerged. Students need more information about their individual abilities and their accelerated academic possibilities at the school. The students also need encouragement. Armed with the knowledge that they have the ability to succeed and reinforced with the encouragement

that they can succeed, there is no limit to the potential of these African-American high school students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Questions for Focus Groups: Guidance Counselors and Teachers

1. Do you believe the District's policies are effective in recruiting and maintaining African-American students in advanced placement classes?   How can they be more effective?

2. Do you believe that Advanced Placement courses provide rigorous curriculum and assist in preparing students for and transitioning to college? Why or why not?

3. What factors support an African-American student's academic achievement?

4. What behavioral indicators do counselor's use to determine talent in African-American students?

5. What performance indicators do counselor's use to determine talent in African-American students?

6. What protocol do you use to record their progress?

7. What measures do you put in place to make sure they stay on track academically?

8. How do you recruit African-American students in advanced placement classes?

9. How do you retain African-American students in advanced placement classes?

10. What role do you think families play in recruiting and retaining African-American students?

11. What role do you think peers play in recruiting and retaining African-American students?

12. How is the AP Program curriculum, course selection and placement information communicated to students, staff and families?

13. What do you hope this research will do for the students? School?

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions: Students

1. What do you know about AP courses?

2. Have you ever considered taking an AP class?

3. If yes, why did you choose not to take the course? If no, why not?

4. Has a teacher or a counselor ever talked to you about taking an AP course?

5. Describe the AP student.   Does your description of this student start in K-8?

6. Do you believe you should have AP courses on your transcript for college entry? Scholarship?

7. Would you be more likely to take an AP course next year if you were told that you had been recommended? Why or why not?

8. What outside factors would enter into your decision whether or not to take the class?

9. What will your friends say if you take an AP course?

10. What will your family say if you take an AP course?

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study of why students are choosing not to participate in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. This study is being conducted by Alisa Lawson-McKinnie, high school principal and student investigator at Cleveland State University and by Dr. Fred Hampton, Cleveland State University faculty member and principal investigator.

You have been selected as a possible participant because you have taken AP classes and/or the guidance counselors have provided me with a list of students who have the potential to be successful in AP classes. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to learn why high-achieving African-American students are choosing not to take Advanced Placement classes.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

I will ask you come in for an individual interview to ask you some questions centered on AP classes. The interview will take place after school at the Cleveland Heights Public library or in a classroom at John Carroll University. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. I will give you a code name or number so that your name will never be given out to anyone. This interview will not be recorded.

I will then ask you to meet with me again after I have written down notes from our interview to make sure I have written down everything correctly from our interview. This will be a very brief meeting scheduled at your convenience.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
There are very minimal risks to your participation in this study. There are no more risks than you would encounter in everyday life. You identity will be concealed unless you report some type of abuse to me. If so, I am required to report that abuse. Otherwise, I will not reveal your identity to anyone at the school or in the community. You are free to give your

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data and tape recordings will be stored in a locked filing cabinet off of the school campus. No one will have access to this information except the researcher. Although teachers and guidance counselors will acknowledge their awareness of the confidential discussion and

their willingness to keep it confidential by signing the informed consent agreement, a breach of confidentiality does exist as I cannot guarantee they will not discuss this.

For further information regarding this research, please contact Dr. Fred Hampton at (216) 687-3828 or f.hampton@csuohio.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.

Statement of Consent:
*I am 18 years or older and have read and understood this consent form. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Script for Teachers and Guidance Counselors

Hello, my name is Alisa Lawson-McKinnie. I am a graduate student at Cleveland State University in the Urban Leadership doctoral program.

I am conducting research on the underrepresentation of African-American high school students in advanced placement (AP) classes.   My advisor, Dr. Fred Hampton, as my advisor, is the principal investigator in my research.

I am inviting you to participate because you work directly with students who have taken AP classes and/or work with those students who should take AP classes based on their grades and test scores.

Participation in this research includes contributing in a focus group with questions centered on AP classes and the academic pathways for high achieving students.   The focus group will be held after school at either the Cleveland Heights library or in a classroom at John Carroll University and will take approximately two hours.   I will give you a code name or number so that your name will never be given out to anyone. Although the conversations will be recorded, I will require that all participants complete a consent form of confidentiality.

You will be free to give your opinion about the changes that you would like to see made in recruiting and retaining more African-American students in AP classes.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at (216) 320-3129 or a_lawson@chuh.org.

APPENDIX E

Recruitment Script for 18-Year Old Students

Hello, my name is Alisa Lawson-McKinnie. I am a graduate student at Cleveland State University in the Urban Leadership doctoral program.

I am conducting research on the underrepresentation of African-American high school students in advanced placement (AP) classes. I am inviting you to participate because you have taken AP classes or you should be taking AP classes based on your grades and academic performance.

Participation in this research includes partaking in an interview with questions centered on AP classes. The interviews will be held after school at either the Cleveland Heights library or in a classroom at John Carroll University, and will take no longer than 60 minutes. I will give you a code name or number so that your name will never be given out to anyone. The interview will not be recorded.

You will be free to give your opinion about the changes that you would like to see made in how AP classes are structured to appeal to more students.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at (216) 320-3129 or a_lawson@chuh.org.