ADDRESSING EDUCATION DEBT:
STUDENT AND TEACHER PRECEPTIONS OF SUCCESSFUL
TEACHING OF LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

by

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Low-income African American students face a number of barriers to achieving academic success. When compared to other low-income students, the challenges facing low-income African American students are unique as they must overcome both economic and racialized barriers. Viewed through the lens of education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006), which considers the effects of long-term social disparities, this thesis addresses two questions: 1) How do students and teachers describe the barriers to students' academic success? and 2) What factors do students and teachers identify in the classroom, school, and community environment that facilitate student engagement and classroom learning? Data for this thesis come from a community-based participatory research project conducted at a racially-segregated, high-poverty public school, and consist of 24 in-depth interviews: 6 teacher interviews, 14 student interviews, and 4 student focus group interviews. Participants include 6 teachers and 9 students. Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their perceptions about their experiences in the school. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through a collaborative process of coding, memoing, and discussion with advising faculty. Student-identified barriers to academic success include behavior problems, educators' inability to manage students, a focus on discipline rather than academics, and a lack of culturally competent educators. Student-identified factors that lead to positive school experiences include authoritative yet caring and

supportive educators, structured small group collaboration, and extracurricular and recreational activities. Teacher-identified barriers to academic success include poor administrative support, inconsistencies in school, and negative out-of-school experiences and influences. Teacher-identified factors that lead to positive school experiences include professional relationship-building skills and cultural competence. Findings provide insight about education debt in schools serving predominantly low-income African American youth and suggest a behavioral, cultural, professional, and institutional manifestation of education debt. Findings also suggest methods for repaying education debt include increasing behavioral and emotional support resources, strengthening professional training and recruitment, and transforming schools into institutions of social justice.

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DEDICATION

To the students of "East Side Academy" and all the struggling schools in America.

Stay strong and brave.

May you get everything you deserve from life, and more.

To my amazing advisors, Dr. Helen E. Petracchi and Dr. Sara Goodkind.

Your tireless support has made this project possible.

Thank You.

PREFACE

This thesis was inspired by my experiences as a research assistant at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work. In June of 2011, I began working with principal researcher, Dr. Sara Goodkind, on her research project investigating single-sex public education. The project developed in reaction to a 2010 vote by the city school board to adopt single sex classrooms in the district's lowest performing school – a policy initiated with the explicit interest of increasing the academic performance of low-income African American students. However, this policy was reversed only three and a half months into the school year because of social and legal controversy. Nevertheless, our team continued to collect data throughout the school year and was exposed to the many challenges faced by inner city public schools. This experience left a lasting impression on me and encouraged me to explore our data further.

I became interested in the pedagogical experiences of students at the school and how these experiences were affected by poverty and race. During my time at the school, I observed bright and motivated African American students failing academically, students, for example, who excelled in our community-based participatory research study, while simultaneously reporting low attendance and grades. My curiosity was further heightened by interviews with students who would describe their academic wants and needs, their most beloved teachers, and how they thought the school could be doing better. Through the course of snowball sampling

methods, we found ourselves interviewing these beloved teachers, talking with them about their own experiences, why they thought students enjoyed their classes, and their perceptions of the challenges faced by their students. It occurred to me that although our project intended to focus on single-sex academics, our data contained a wealth of information about pedagogy in schools serving predominantly low-income African American students; data that could not be ignored. Thus, I chose to conduct an independent analysis of the data to explore and describe what can be learned from this school about the challenges and successful teaching of low-income African American students.

With the help of the our team's lead researcher, as well as my academic advisor, my ambition to explore and understand the experiences of low-income African American students has evolved into a Bachelor of Philosophy undergraduate honors thesis. I feel very fortunate to have had this opportunity to conduct advanced-level research and feel even more fortunate to give voice to the students I came to know through my year collecting data in the school. My intention is for this thesis to be the first of many more works to come that advocates on behalf of oppressed and marginalized communities, and gives voice to those who are often forgotten in the pursuit of social justice.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Low-income African American students face a number of barriers to academic success. Unfortunately, differences in academic achievement in the United States exist between racial groups, as well within low-income and higher-income students of the same race. These circumstances create a unique set of challenges for low-income African American students who must overcome both racialized and economic barriers to academic success. Academic success is particularly significant considering the importance of educational attainment. According to the Pew Charitable Trust (2012), education serves as the gateway to economic mobility and stability, especially for low-income students. Educational attainment for low-income students is particularly important, as the American Psychological Association (2013) states, "Inadequate education contributes to the cycle of poverty by making it more difficult for low-income children to lift themselves and future generations out of poverty" (p. 2).

Most often, the educational achievement of African American students is compared to that of white students, resulting in a concept commonly referred to as the "racial achievement gap." However, it is arguable these groups are not comparable, as low-income African Americans have experienced inter-generational and historic oppression, poverty, segregation, community degradation, and under-education on a scale incomparable to their white counterparts. Furthermore, not all low-income students face similar social and racialized barriers

to academic success as low-income African American students. This notion of dissimilarity between comparative income groups is explained as follows:

> Racial and ethnic discrimination have played an important role historically in why ethnic and racial minority groups disproportionately occupy the lower rungs of the social class ladder in contemporary U.S. society … .Thus, equating ethnic minority and majority groups on income, for example, does not equate the two groups in terms of their routine social experiences (American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Educational Disparities, 2012, p. 12).

Therefore, it is difficult to develop comprehensive and effective solutions for low-income African American achievement when the reference group is one that exists in a vastly different environment. Rather than adopting the perspective of the "achievement gap," this thesis seeks to understand academic achievement of low-income African American students by adopting Gloria Ladson-Billing's (2006) concept of "education debt."

According to Ladson-Billings (2006), the "achievement gap" refers to existing disparities in educational outcome (tests scores, school attainment, etc.) between African Americans and whites, Latinos and whites, and recent immigrants and whites; white students are the referent. However, the notion of "education debt" is rooted in an appreciation of the role of inter-generational and historic social oppression imposed upon African Americans. She argues that an education debt has evolved as a result of the residual and cumulative effects of long-term social disparities, and that this debt has a fundamental influence on current African American achievement, particularly for those students who are low-income. Ladson-Billings draws metaphorical comparisons between the U.S. economy and understanding educational disparities. She explains the concept of the achievement gap resembles that of *national deficit*, "the amount in which [spending] exceeds income over a period of time," whereas education debt more closely

resembles *national debt*, "the sum of all previously incurred annual national deficits" (p. 4). In this way, the achievement gap is merely a superficial representation of a much larger social problem known as education debt. From this perspective, education debt can be defined as the summative effect of over three hundred years of racial achievement gaps, as well as the "foregoing [of] schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in low-income kids, which deficit leads to a variety of social problems" (Haveman, 2006, personal contact as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 5).

In order to gain an appreciation for the impact of education debt and its effect on low-income African American students, this thesis has investigated the experiences of African American students and their teachers at a high-poverty, racially segregated, urban high school. Using qualitative interviews obtained through a community-based participatory research project, student and teacher observations were analyzed inductively from a critical social work perspective to describe the experiences of the students in this school. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to how students and teachers describe the manifestation of education debt, what they have observed being done to address these issues, and what students and teachers perceive to be challenging this social problem effectively.

Chapter Two, the literature review, begins by describing the historic accumulation of education debt experienced by African Americans in the United States from colonial times through today. The educational experiences of African American students in the twenty-first century are then discussed through literature, paying particular attention to how poverty and race influence education. Following is Chapter Three, the methods section, which includes a discussion of methods employed to conduct an investigation of student and teacher opinions and

experiences. Research findings are then presented in Chapter Four, followed by a discussion of findings through the lens of education debt and their implications for future research, policy, and practice in Chapter 5.

1.1 IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The social problem addressed by this thesis, educational experiences of low-income African American students, remains significant in contemporary American. In 2011, 7.5 million African Americans enrolled in public school, and 2.8 million (37 percent) of these students were low-income (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). A failure to investigate and to address the educational inequality experienced by these students means 2.8 million Americans may be denied access to the American dream of social mobility. Innovative and effective solutions for this social problem *must* be sought or, as a nation, we will suffer the consequences of foregoing the potential human capital of these students through their contributions to economic and scientific advancement. Many of the students I met while conducting this study had the potential to become doctors, engineers, scholars, and other highly skilled professionals. Yet I fear these children may not have the opportunity to accomplish their dreams and achieve their potential, due their school's, community's, and government's inability to reconcile their educational disenfranchisement.

This thesis seeks information directly from the youth and their educators in order to address how we can begin to repay the education debt we owe this population. What is unique to this study is that these perspectives were obtained through community engagement and

discussions with the individuals experiencing this social problem first hand – low-income African American students and their teachers. In this study, students and teachers are considered the experts in understanding their experiences and the problems they face, as well understanding how these problems might be addressed. Therefore, not only does this thesis attempt to provide strategies for addressing one of the nation's most pressing social problems, but it does so by way of engaging the community that is experiencing the problem.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Racial and economic disparities are present at all levels of education, and have been relatively consistent throughout the history of the United States. While the American colonies embraced education as one of the keys to success, success was not accessible to all. Throughout the period of slavery, the education of African American slaves was almost non-existent, and in most cases forbidden. During the Great Awakening (1720-1735) some slave owners were encouraged to teach their slaves to read and write as a means of Protestant indoctrination (Trattner, 1999). By the early-to-mid nineteenth century, a small number of educational opportunities were becoming available to freed former slaves in the North, such as the African Free School in New York City (New York Historical Society, 2013) and The Institute for Colored Youth in Cheyney, Pennsylvania (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). However, it was not until 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery and freed over four million former slaves, that African Americans received any formal educational support. In terms of education debt, the nearly 250 years that African Americans were enslaved in the United States represents a significant educational deficit.

Two years later, the United States Congress created the Freedmen's Bureau, the first federal welfare agency designed to support newly freed slaves and the millions of Southerners

suffering after the Civil War (Trattner, 1999). This agency primarily aided African Americans in their transition to freedom and encouraged the creation and financing of African American public schools, the distribution of rations, and helped many African Americans obtain employment. Along with the Freedmen's Bureau, a movement known as "Radical Reconstruction" also occurred during this time. Radial Reconstruction was characterized by a deep commitment to education and prosperity on the part of African Americans, as well as a rise of African American politicians and scholars, and an unprecedented acknowledgement of African Americans by state and county legislation (Newby and Tyack, 1971; Willis, 2013). During this period, several African American colleges and universities were founded, and legislators worked to make public education more available for all (Newby and Tyack, 1971). While the decade after the emancipation was one of hope and empowerment for many newly freed African Americans, this access to prosperity would soon be denied for many generations to come.

Southern whites, many of whom suffered extreme economic losses following the end of slavery, sought to maintain their racial superiority to African Americans and met the progress of African Americans with fierce opposition. Repressive and systematically exploitative "Black Codes" and Jim Crow laws were soon passed, destroying much of the progress made by the Freedmen's Bureau, which ended in 1872, followed by the dismantling of the Radical Reconstruction movement in 1876 (Blackmon, 2008). These laws sought to legalize the subordinate status of African Americans. Along with hostile and violent racism, African Americans in the South, where the overwhelming majority resided, were by and large excluded from state and county welfare programming. Funding for African American public schools was

minimal, and by the end of the nineteenth century, African Americans were forced to rely primarily on mutual aid and self-help organizations (Trattner, 1991).

These coordinated efforts worked to ensure the social marginalization of African Americans and constructed a society where extreme poverty, mass criminalization, and a lack of education were everyday realities. With regard to education debt, much of U.S. society fought actively against the education of African Americans, becoming largely successful in their attempts to rob many African American children of formal schooling, or at best, providing sub-standard education. For example, a common social reality was the inability of African Americans to find employment with decent wages, and thus the majority lived in dire poverty. As a result, millions of African American families could not afford the luxury of sending their children to school. In less common cases, when children were able to attend school, the availability and quality of these schools was often questionable, as impoverished communities struggled to maintain these institutions in the wake of government neglect (Newby and Tyack, 1971).

Another barrier to prosperity imposed on African Americans was the mass criminalization of the race. Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name* (2008) describes the horrific invention of "convict leasing" during the end of the 1800s, which was a government-run, forced-labor practice employed in most southern states where African American prisoners (many of whom were imprisoned for crimes whites would not have been) were leased to private industries and compelled to labor unpaid throughout the duration of their sentences. Convict leasing laws were accompanied by increases in sentence length for minor crimes committed by African Americans and the creation of new laws levied exclusively on African American citizens. For

example, an African American in the South could be arrested for acts such as speaking loudly in the presence of a white woman, selling produce after sun down, and/or not having a job. Under the notorious "Pig Laws," an African American found guilty of stealing a pig, worth one cent, could spend up to five years in prison working in a forced labor camp. By 1890, African American men and women made up 90 percent of the prison population in the South, a third of whom were boys (under the age of 16), children who would not likely receive an education in their new lives as "freed" citizens.

Figure 1. Young Men Imprisoned in a Forced Labor Camp

Source: *Slavery By Another Name* (PBS.org)

Blackmon (2008) argues the treatment of African Americans *after* emancipation was worse than during slavery, as during slavery the lives of slaves were protected because they were considered private property. After freedom, the lives of African Americans meant little to those

in power, supporting the arrival of public lynching, a one-fourth mortality rate in forced labor camps, and mass negligence of the conditions of poverty. The oppression inflicted on African Americans by whites at the turn of the twentieth century dismantled and destroyed almost all mechanisms for success and quality education. In turn, this suppression of African American prosperity would prove more devastating to their legacy in the United States than their status as slaves fifty years hence (Newby and Tyack, 1971; Blackmon, 2008; Trattner, 1991).

Despite passage of the Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery and the Fourteenth Amendment granting equal citizenship to African Americans, with *Plessey v. Ferguson (1896)*[1] the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of "separate but equal." Most importantly, *Plessey* sanctioned and normalized racial discrimination for the better part of the next century, thus also denying African Americans equivalent and adequate education. As Newby and Tyack (1971) explain:

> Integration was and is not simply a legal or educational issue: it is also a matter of power… The *Plessy* case of 1896 had rationalized segregation while it coolly overlooked the blatant inequalities of separate facilities (p. 10).

One indicator of the unequal conditions of segregation can be seen when considering the lack of progress experienced by African Americans during the Progressive Era. As stated by Trattner (1991), "An era marked by economic progress and social mobility, this group [the nation's Black citizens] remained poor and powerless" (p. 180). While the Progressive Era is known for the growth of both private and public human services to address wide spread poverty, immigration, and urban sprawl, African Americans were almost completely excluded from these services and,

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[1] 163 U.S. 537 (1896)

as a result, experienced little social change during this period of general social reform. In fact, almost all Settlement Houses and Charity Organization Societies excluded African Americans and were typically operated by individuals with racist views, mirroring those of the contemporary populace (Trattner, 1999). Some social service organizations and settlement houses serving African Americans were founded during this time, usually by African American women and in connection with African American churches. However, with little financial resources and a lack of broader social support, the quantity of social service agencies available to African Americans was dwarfed in comparison to those available to whites. The Urban League and the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were also founded during the Progressive Era, representing a continued effort to address opportunities for African Americans despite great opposition.

As Newby and Tyack's (1971) describe in "Some Historical Perspectives on Black Education," during the early twentieth century all schools suffered greatly, but schools for African American students suffered the most. Widespread and comprehensive school reform began soon thereafter, a measure that resulted in the improvement of white schools only, and in some cases, worsened the conditions of schools for African American students. For example, despite a 180 percent increase in education spending between 1900 and 1912, financial support of African American schools changed little. In many states, school buildings for African American students could cost as little as $20, and teachers could be making as little as $25 a month. As Harlen (1968, as cited in Newby and Tyack, 1971) describes:

> What is the American School system? When you have no schoolhouse, and when you have no teacher, why call it a school system? If you must take a little old, tumbled-down log hut, with no desks, or blackboard or map or textbooks, except for a blueback speller

here and there, and the man who teaches can hardly count his cotton weights, and school only lasts three months a year, can you say that is an American school system? (p. 197)

Centralized control of education also contributed to poor educational opportunities for African American students, as their schools soon came under the control of virulent racists, or at least, apathetic whites who supported notions of African American inferiority. In most cases, African American schools were created as institutions to maintain the lesser status of African Americans and socialized children to see themselves as less than equal. Some states prohibited schools for African Americans to teach government and civil rights, geography, and foreign language. Furthermore, with the advent of vocational alternative programming, millions of African American students were funneled-out of traditional schools and into trade schools, where they received minimal training with dismal job prospects. The lack of representation of African American teachers, particularly in the North, is also noteworthy. Consider the following records from 1908:

Table 1. Presence of African American Students and Teachers in Public Schools by City in 1908 **(Source: Newby and Tyack, 1971)**

City	Number of African American Teachers	Number of African American Students
Boston	3	1456
Chicago	16	3806
Detroit	2	517
Los Angeles	0	1056

Pittsburgh	0	2792

Sadly, segregated African American schools would continue throughout the majority of the 1900s. In 1932, for example, South Carolina counties spent (on average) $1 on the education of each African American student, compared with $100 spent on the education of each white student (Newby and Tyack, 1971).

Yet, despite tremendous odds and against the will of most, African Americans were making extraordinary social contributions. Scholars and activists such as W.E.B DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and Ella Baker, achieved fame at a time when few in the public acknowledged African American society. The significance of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s also pays tribute to exceptional achievements of African Americans. Furthermore, by the mid 1900s, over one hundred African American colleges and universities were founded, and by 1953, according to the U.S. Department of Education (1991), nearly 80,000 African American students were enrolled in these post-secondary institutions.

Within African American scholarship, the sentiment of the time was that as long as segregation remained, equal citizenship for African Americans would be unattainable. Starting in the 1930s, the NAACP began constructing their arguments against discrimination, and directed their first major attack at school segregation. In a long series of court cases, leading up to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)[2],* Thurgood Marshall argued to the U.S. Supreme Court that not only was school segregation leading African Americans to receive a

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[2] 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

substandard education, but that these segregated schools were also psychologically damaging to African American children (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court overturned *Plessey v. Ferguson*, declaring "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (United States Court, 2013, paragraph 13). The *Brown* decision represented a monumental shift in American racial policy and the future of African American civil rights.

Despite language from the Supreme Court to end school segregation "with all deliberate speed" (Newby and Tyack, 1971, p. 201), response to the federal measure was slow, as many states vowed "never" to allow African Americans to attend their schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009). As education expert Diane Ravitch (2010) reflects on her own hometown at the time, "the Houston schools were segregated, and the local school board had no intention of complying with the decision. Anyone who spoke up on behalf of racial integration was likely to be called a communist or a pinko" (p. 114). Over the next two decades states continued to deny African Americans access to desegregated schools. For example, by 1961 three states (Mississippi, South Carolina, and Alabama) continued to operate completely segregated school systems under state law in frank opposition to the new federal standards. Yet, where desegregation laws were upheld white resistance continued. Grassroots anti-desegregationists protested the presence of African Americans in "their" schools, and often engaged in violent confrontation and intimidation (Library of Congress, 2013).

Many of the first courageous African American students to attend previously white schools were met by angry mobs of protestors, requiring the students to be escorted into the building by U.S. Marshalls and National Guardsmen to ensure their safety. In 1960, for example, first-grader Ruby Bridges and three other students in New Orleans were accompanied

to their first day of school by U.S. Marshalls. Ruby's father was fired from his job after enrolling his daughter in the school, and the parents of many of Ruby's white classmates promptly removed their children from the school. In other examples, local and state governments participated in the defiance of the federal desegregation laws. For example, in 1963 George Wallace, Governor of Alabama, blocked the entrance to the University of Alabama, preventing African American students from entering the building and registering for classes. The governor did not stand down until President John K. Kennedy ordered National Guard troops to the site to escort the African American students onto campus. (Library of Congress, 2013)

Figure 2. Ruby Bridges, 1960

(Source: Library of Congress)

The resistance to school desegregation is significant to the conceptualization of education debt. Despite the ruling in *Brown*, throughout the 1950s and 1960s African Americans continued to be denied the right to equal education. As a coalition, African Americans demanded access to equal schools for their children, demonstrating resiliency and a dedication to learning despite centuries of oppression and educational injustice. The lack of commitment to equal education for African Americans during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s merely sheds light on the realities existing since emancipation. This aggressive resistance to education for African Americans also underscores the fact that many Americans were satisfied with the status quo, complicit in education neglect, and would have perpetuated this education debt had federal intervention not occurred.

By 1960, the quest for desegregation had expanded to a mass movement known as the Civil Rights and Freedom Movement, which campaigned to remove all traces of institutional racism from American life. Grassroots organizations such as the Urban League, NAACP, Black Power organizations, and other civil rights groups advocated, organized, marched, and boycotted for equal treatment under the law in one of the most important periods in the legacy of the United States. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964[3], school desegregation became more enforceable, as the federal government could now withhold funding from states and districts that did not comply (Library of Congress, 2013). Anti-desegregationists, however, began seeking alternatives to continue their avoidance of African Americans and adopted the concept of "school choice" encouraging the creation of private schools where white students could escape (Ravitch, 2011). Furthermore, Clotfelter (2004) explains that some districts were able to "side

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[3] PL 88-352 (1964)

step" the desegregation laws through strategic efforts to meet federal standards while maintaining segregated schools. For example, at the time, Mexican and Latino students were identified as white, and some district were able to appear desegregated because they created completely African American and Latino schools.

In 1971, the federal government encouraged the busing of African American students in order to desegregate previously white schools. Despite continued anti-desegregation efforts, including widespread anti-busing protests and organizing, this tactic proved highly effective in finally allowing more schools to achieve the federal desegregation standards. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Project (2004), in 1960 only two percent of African Americans attended desegregated schools compared with 45 percent by the late 1980s. African Americans also increased their attendance in colleges and universities. For the first time in American history, corrective efforts were being taken that would begin to repay the education debt owed to African Americans, finally giving them the opportunities they deserved.

However, much like the radical reconstruction movement a century prior, corrective efforts to amend the educational inequalities of the past soon lost support and dissolved. Through a series of Supreme Court decisions, most notably Oklahoma Board of Education v. Dowell (1991) and Freeman v. Pitts (1992), federal oversight and sanctions promoting desegregation declined, enabling schools to lessen their desegregation efforts and the majority of American schools soon returned to their racially isolated states (Teaching Tolerance Project, 2004). According to the Teaching Tolerance Project (2004), by 1993, American schools were back to pre-1970 rates of segregation. As Princeton professor, Charles T. Clotfelter (2004) explains in his book, *After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Segregation*, the faltering

resolve of the federal government coupled with local governments' willingness to comply with racist citizens' wishes led to the reversal of the desegregation trends, and other measures of educational support. As such, many public schools in America instituted de facto segregation, leading African American students to again be relegated to inherently unequal schools.

Afrocentric arguments against desegregation also began to immerge. It was believed that desegregated schools often failed to provide African American students with the tools and skills necessary to combat the stubborn oppression and racism that continued to plague their lives. As Delpit (2012) explains, the pre-*Brown* and segregated African American schools instilled a sense of empowerment in their students and equipped them with the mentality that they would need to "work twice as hard to get just as much" as a white student. Anderson (as cited in Delpit, 2012) explains that from the time of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement education was taught as "how you asserted yourself as a free person" and "how you could work for social uplift for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people" (pp. 38-39). However, desegregated public schools were not designed to *uplift* and *empower* students because white students, who comprised the vast majority of public school students, did not need these values and skills to be successful. Indeed, desegregated schools functioned as a mechanism to equalize education, yet the educational needs of African American students were greater than those of their white peers because of historic education debt. As such, African Americans who were raised during the Civil Rights Era fared better in desegregated schools than the next generation because they carried with them these values and tools. The following generations, however, were taught little of their culture in school, and nothing resembling the skills necessary to counter racialized stereotypes. When many schools returned

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to de facto segregation, they hardly resembled the African American schools of the past. Rather, they became public schools that happened to be occupied by African American students.

Throughout the 1990s, academic growth was slow and in many cases reversed for African American students. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act[4] became law, mandating comprehensive school reform designed to "build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America" (Stiefel, Schwartz, Chellman, 2007. p. 530). The reform gave particular emphasis to improving the performance of traditionally low-performing subgroups of students by imposing sanctions on schools that do not meet adequate yearly progress towards proficiency by 2014 (Stiefel, Schwartz, Chellman, 2007). However, many education researchers argue (e.g., Ravitch, 2010; Stiefel, Schwartz, Cellman, 2007) that the mechanisms of test-driven accountably alone could not provide schools with the necessary tools to provide underserved students nor the resources to accomplish the lofty goals of NCLB. As Ladson-Billings (2006) explains, African American students will continue to struggle in school until efforts have been made to repay the education debt that is owed to them and they are provided the resources to achieve an equal education and overcome the forces of oppression.

2.2   EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The concept of education debt is based on the notion that historic educational inequality has a fundamental influence on the current educational experiences of African American students,

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[4] PL 107-110 (2001)

particularly those who are low-income. Hence, it is useful to understanding the challenges low-income African American students face in the 21st century. This section begins with a review of the benefits of education and its implications for children living in poverty. Following is a review of the effects of various challenges and barriers to educational success experienced by low-income African American students. This section discusses the influence of poverty and race on education, and the synergism of the two. While discussed separately, taken together poverty and race create a combined disadvantage for low-income African American that limits their educational success.

Education is considered one of the gateways to socioeconomic success in the United States. However, education in the 21st century is more essential to lifelong economic success than ever before. As Alan Krueger (President Obama's Chairman of the Council of the Economic Advisors) explains, the American economy is experiencing a "skill-biased technology change," where technology, automation, and globalization are replacing the need for low-skill labor (2012). As demand for low-skill labor declines, individuals without high school or college degrees are having an increasingly difficult time finding gainful employment than their counterparts did in previous decades. On the other hand, individuals with analytic skills and college degrees have benefitted from this skill-biased technology change, as these individuals have the educational training to meet the demands of the changing labor market. The decline in union membership (20 percent in 1982 compared to 12 percent in 2012) has further decreased the availability of livable wages and job security for employees with lower levels of education, as unions have been shown to protect low-skill jobs from unequal shifts in the labor market (Card, as cited in Krueger, 2012). In many cases, less educated workers are forced to work at or

near the minimum wage, an hourly rate that has decreased in relative value since the 1980s (Lee, as cited in Krueger, 2012).

This economic shift is one of the primary reasons the wage gap between high school graduates and college graduates has soared over the past four decades, contributing to an increase in economic inequality in the United States (Krueger, 2012). While education has been a predictor of income for several generations, according to The Hamilton Project, over the past 40 years, incomes for college graduates have increased by more than one-third while decreasing for individuals with only a high school degree or less (Greenstone, Harris, Li, Looney, Patashnik, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reports that in 2010, the median annual income for a young adult with a bachelor's degree was $45,000, compared with $37,000 for an associate's degree, $29,900 for those with a high school diploma, and $21,000 for those without a high school degree or GED. These statistics suggest that young adults with a college degree earn 50 percent more than individuals with only a high school degree and twice as much as individuals who did not complete high school. Furthermore, The Pew Charitable Trust (2012) cites that over 80 percent of those who do not complete high school earn less than $30,000 annually, and nearly half are unemployed compared with only 15 percent of college graduates. According to Looney and Greenstone (2011), after adjusting for inflation, the median annual income for a male in 1970 with only a high school degree was close to $50,000, compared with $26,000 in 2012. This increasing income differential between high school and college degree earners represents a fundamental shift in the educational needs of American citizens, where education not only represents a gateway to economic success but also to economic security and wellbeing. While there was a time when an individual with a high school degree could

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participate and prosper in the middle class, this phenomenon is no longer a reality. Our current economy demands that Americans receive quality basic education to better insure their success in institutions of higher learning.

Education continues to represent the primary vehicle for economic mobility, especially for low-income individuals. According to the Pew Charitable Trust's Economic Mobility Project (2012), four-year college degree programs represent the largest source of economic mobility and stability particularly for those living in poverty and prevent downward mobility for middle and upper-income individuals. The merits of a post-secondary education are significant for low-income students, as almost half of those raised in the bottom quintile of family income remain there into adulthood, while only 10 percent of people with a college degree were found in the bottom quintile, remaining there into adulthood. Having a college degree makes a person three times more likely to rise from the bottom of the economic spectrum all the way to the top. While the vast majority of Americans (84 percent) earn more money than their parents at the same age, individuals at the bottom quintile of family income are the least likely to surpass their parents' income or wealth. Moreover, college degree earners from the bottom quintile of family income make the largest gains in absolute wealth compared with the income level they were raised in, and 85 percent had greater income than their parents did. Therefore, successfully completing high school followed by successfully completing college are essential steps for lifting people out of poverty, thus repaying education debt (Pew Charitable Trust, 2012).

While income and wealth are not the only benefits of education, the realities of living in poverty make the link between education and income hard to ignore. Beyond income, however, higher levels of education have been shown to increase health and longevity, civic participation,

and decrease crime and incarceration rates (Lochner, 2011). Furthermore, education has been linked to an overall increase in productivity and a decrease in reliance on disability and welfare payments, an increase in marriage rates and raising children out of poverty (Greenstone, Harris, Li, Looney, Patashnik, 2012). While many of these factors may be related to income, citizens with higher levels of education have better access to information about health and preventative care, child development, personal finances, risk-behavior and lifestyle choices compared with individuals with less education (Cutler and Lleras-Muney, as cited in Greenstone, Harris, Li, Looney, Patashnik, 2012).

As education represents a critical avenue for economic mobility, security and social prosperity, understanding the barriers to educational success for low-income African American students is critical. The following sections review literature about poverty and race, and how these factors influence the educational experiences of low-income African American students.

2.3   POVERTY

A large body of research has demonstrated that poverty undermines child development and education even when holding race constant. However, as 37 percent of African American children enrolled in public schools in 2011 lived in poverty, the adverse effects of poverty are disproportionately experienced by these students and are thus more likely to influence their educational achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

2.3.1 Psychological Development

One of the most poignant effects of poverty is its impact on the psychological development of children. According to the American Psychological Association (2013), poverty exposes children to trauma and chronic stress, which has been shown to impair memory, concentration, the ability to process new information, and adapt to change. This stress and trauma results from poor children's heightened exposure to a variety of risk factors, including risk of housing instability and homelessness, poor nutrition and food insecurity, poor physical health and a lack of healthcare, abuse and neglect, frequent changes in caregiving, and community violence. As a result, poor children are at higher-risk for developing behavioral and emotional problems such as developmental delays, anxiety, depression, ADHD, aggression, conduct disorder, and impulsivity. These stressors and accompanying psychological challenges inhibit students' ability to engage with and focus in school, learn new things, adapt to change, and maintain appropriate behavior in the classroom and school environment. Therefore, low-income students attend school with greater emotional and psychological needs than their higher-income counterparts, and as a result, are less equipped to learn.

To appreciate the breadth of the psychological impacts of poverty, consider the following true story. In 2001, renowned child trauma psychiatrist, Dr. Pamela Canter, head of the Children's Mental Health Alliance in New York City, was commissioned by the city's Department of Education to assess the psychological impact of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the city's public school students. She found plenty of traumatized students, but less so because of 9/11 and more so because many of these children were growing up in poverty. In her assessment, Dr. Cantor describes the behavior of low-income children as indicative of high

levels of trauma exposure. These children, she reports, were observably distressed, reactive, sad, aggressive, and easily distracted. In high-poverty schools, where this behavior is concentrated, she stated, "chaos reigned." From her perspective, the psychological trauma of poverty was analogous to experiencing one of the largest and most tragic terrorist attacks in American history. After she completed her assessment, Dr. Canter resigned from the Children's Mental Health Alliance to found her own organization, Turnaround for Children, dedicated to training New York City teachers and staff in trauma-informed education practices. (Nocera, 2012)

2.3.2 Concentrated Poverty

One of the reasons the impacts of poverty are so severe results from the exacerbating effects of concentrated poverty. As poverty in the United States has become more urban and concentrated in neighborhoods, children and families living in poverty are surrounded by other individuals and families facing similar experiences. In high-poverty areas, social and human services struggle to meet the overwhelming needs of people, and their struggles are often unmitigated (Noguera, 2011). As a result, children living in poverty are immersed in communities, commonly referred to as "ghettos", that are dangerous, stress inducing, and even toxic, where the effects of poverty are telescoped in a phenomenon known as "concentration effect" (Wilson, 1990, p. 1).

Concentration effect also undermines schools serving high-poverty communities[5], particularly in urban areas, as these schools are inundated with students who demonstrate high

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[5] Defined as schools where 76 percent or more of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

levels of behavioral and emotional challenges compared to middle or low-poverty schools[6] (Noguera, 2011). According to Ladson-Billings (2006), urban schools are the least equipped to support the needs of their students (compared to rural or suburban schools) because urban districts receive less funding than other districts. For example, in 2006, the Chicago public school district spent $8,482 per pupil while a nearby suburban district spent roughly $17,291 per pupil (Ladson-Billings, 2006).   In sum, while urban schools serve children with higher emotional, behavioral and academic needs than suburban districts, they are less equipped to support these students due to funding disparities. Furthermore, Noguera (2011) argues that high-poverty schools often function in isolation from community resources, as the organizations and agencies nearby are overwhelmed with the high demands of the neighborhood, while organizations from outside the community often neglect the neighborhood because they perceive it to be hostile and potentially dangerous. As a result, Wacquant (2002, as cited in Noguera, 2011) argues that schools in high-poverty areas become negative social assets to the community, functioning poorly because they are overwhelmed by the needs of their students. He argues that these poorly performing schools serve as an obstacle to neighborhood improvement and stability, and thus fuel the cycle of concentrated poverty.

2.3.3   Out-of-School Support

Poverty further undermines education by reducing children's exposure to healthy development outside of school. Children living in poverty have access to fewer academic and social support resources outside of school when compared to middle and upper income children (Noguera,

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[6] Schools where 49 and 24 percent or less of the students, respectively, are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

2011). Resources such as tutoring, homework support, afterschool programs, and summer enrichment programs provide an academic advantage to children whose families can afford to utilize these services (Lareau, 2003). However, many of these out-of-school programs are private and financially inaccessible to children living in poverty. Furthermore, low-income communities have fewer of these programs available, further limiting low-income families' ability to access these opportunities for their children.

In the wake of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) standardized testing movement, these out-of-school enrichment opportunities are proving more essential than ever before, as many public schools, particularly those in low-income communities, have been forced to limit the focus of their curricula to state assessment material (Noguera, 2009). Therefore, children's exposure to and engagement with the arts, music, media, and other forms of non-testable development such as creativity and critical thinking is often dependent on out-of-school programming. When considering the role and value placed on the arts within American society, it is arguable that these achievements are just as valuable to student learning as reading and arithmetic. While these types of opportunities have been shown to advance children's academics they are often inaccessible or underutilized by children living in poverty (Noguera, 2009; Lareau, 2003).

2.3.4   Parents and Caregivers Living in Poverty

Parents and caregivers living in poverty also struggle with being involved and supporting their children's education for a variety of reasons. According to Coleman (1998, as cited in Noguera, 2011), positive relationships between parents and schools are essential ingredients in healthy

schools with these relationships mutually reinforcing student achievement. However, unique barriers to cultivating these relationships exist for low-income parents and caregivers. Time and availability play a major role in creating and maintaining school/parent and/or guardian relationships. Unfortunately, low-income parents/guardians are often less able to devote the necessary time as they are more likely to be single parents who work multiple jobs, lack transportation, and are unable to take time off work when compared with more involved middle and high income families. According to a study by Guryan, Hurst, and Kearney (2008), parents and caregivers with high levels of education, which correlates with income, were able to devote more hours per week caring for the needs of their children. Findings suggest parents with less than a high school degree could spend roughly 12 hours per week caring for their children, while parents with a high school degree spend 13.5 hours per week, and parents with a college degree or higher spend almost 17 hour per week (Guryan, Hurst, Kearney, 2008). The challenges facing single parents are particularly salient for African American youth, as these children are more likely to reside in single parent households. In 2011, for example, 35 percent of African American children lived in two parent households, compared to 75 percent of whites, 65 percent of Latinos, and 52 percent of Native Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Cultural and racial differences have also been shown to lead to a lack of trust between low-income parents and schools, challenging the important relationship that should exist between the two (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Noguera, 2009).

Not only do low-income parents and caregivers have less time and flexibility to be involved in their children's school, but these parents also have less time and ability to assist their children with schoolwork and provide intellectually stimulating environments. For example, for

a single mother of three children who relies on public transportation, a trip to the museum or library is a much more demanding experience than it is for a family with time, money, and a car. Another example, provided by Wallace (2013) is the classic parenthood experience of "the last minute science project." Many parents are familiar with this scenario: your child comes to you the night a big school project is due and asks for help because they have not started it yet. However, the differences in how this typical scenario is resolved based on income are significant. Middle-income parents can access their computers and help their children with research, drive to the store, and afford to buy poster board and supplies. They also have the background and experience to advise their child in how to construct the project in a timely manner. On the other hand, parents/guardians living in poverty are unlikely to have a computer and other research material at home, they are less likely to have access to a car, and may not have experience to help their child in the subject of the project. As a result, the next day, the upper-income student comes to school with an impressive quality science project, while the low-income child's project is subpar or possibly non-existent. Both children forgot about the project, but the low-income child will receive a lower grade and will appear to care less about school because the circumstances of his or her family's poverty.

Finally, children in poverty often lack access to basic skill cultivation at home and in their communities, relying solely on schools to provide these essential academic conventions. While schools do teach basic skills, such as reading, grammar, and math operations, Delpit (2006) explains these skills are practiced and reinforced at higher rates outside-of-school in middle-income families than they are in low-income families. Social nuances such as the language patterns and strategies for accessing new information that are employed by middle-

income families expose children to opportunities to strengthen and expand their basic knowledge (Delpit, 2006). Reading stories, writing wish lists and thank you cards, and interacting with adults who have large vocabularies has a critical impact on school readiness of children and their mastery of academic concepts. Payne and colleagues (2001) note that most low-income individuals know and/or use roughly 600-800 words and almost exclusively employ casual register when speaking. However, middle and upper-income families have been shown to know and/or use over 1,000 words and have access to both formal and casual register. Access and exposure to formal register and large vocabularies are critical for children because state assessment tests, as well as the SAT and ACT, are written in formal register. Furthermore, employment opportunities, particularly well-paying jobs, will require individuals to use formal register and demonstrate a mastery of basic verbal and math skills (Payne et al., 2001). Delpit (2006) concludes that while all children and young adults are required to have basic skills and layer advanced academic skills upon these foundations, low-income children have been shown to lack these basic abilities because they are completely reliant on schools for this knowledge.

In sum, poverty itself has effects on education. First, poverty impairs the psychological development of children because it exposes them to heightened levels of trauma and stress. Second, the effects of this psychological trauma and stress are often magnified in areas of concentrated poverty, where almost all low-income, urban students reside, resulting in a phenomenon known as concentration effect. Third, despite their academic value, poor children often do not have access to out-of-school and extracurricular support compared to other children, as these sorts of programs are generally private, difficult to reach, and less often offered in public schools. Fourth, the parents and caregivers of children living in poverty struggle to be involved

in their children's schools and academics due to significant time and financial constraints. As such, these parents face many barriers to creating relationships with their children's school, assisting their children with schoolwork, providing stimulating home environments, and encouraging the cultivation of formative skills.

2.4   RACE

2.4.1   Contemporary Racism

Despite over half a century or more of empirical research documenting the inherent abilities and equality of African Americans, racism and racial hierarchies continue to persist in contemporary society. Lisa Delpit (2012) contends that many Americans still believe that African Americans are cognitively and intellectually inferior:

> Many reasons have been given for why African American children are not excelling in schools in the United States. One that is seldom spoken aloud, but that is buried within the American psyche, is that black children are innately less capable. (p. 3)

In fact, some scholars believe that contemporary racism may be more detrimental to the prosperity of African Americans than in prior decades because overt and conscious discrimination have become socially taboo while racialized thinking and prejudice continue to exist. Notions of race have become embedded in the conceptual worldview of Americans, resulting in more "fixed" and "submerged" offensive denotations about racial differences (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9). As such, there is consensus across a variety of disciplines that the

United States continues to be a society where skin color, origin, and ethnicity affect one's life outcomes and experiences. According to Delpit (2012), our social environment is laden with toxic racist ideologies and tropes, which she refers to as "racist-smog," influencing every citizen regardless of skin color. This "racist-smog" has a profound effect on the school experiences and achievement of African American students in many ways.

Delpit (2012) explains that African American students experience racial oppression in their schools from teachers, administrators, and other professionals who are generally unaware they are causing these students any harm. As such, African American students are likely to be oppressed by individuals who believe they are being kind, caring, and concerned for their students. Because an underlying perception that African Americans are intellectually inferior persists within contemporary society, school professionals, knowingly and unknowingly, lower their expectations for students of color. Teachers and professionals may also reduce the rigor of their lessons and assessments in an erroneous attempt to be sensitive to the social and economic challenges they perceive their African American students to face. Regardless of their motivation, many educators are likely to have lower expectations of their African American students compared to other students, leading them to "dumb-down" their lessons, teach less content, teach less actively, and focus on remedial learning with these students (Delpit, 2006; 2012).

Hence, low-income students tend to begin school less prepared than their higher-income peers, but low-income African American students are also likely to be perceived as less competent even when compared to other students living in poverty. In fact, low-income African American students are more likely to be placed in remedial classes than other are struggling

students, as a racialized perception exists that these students are inherently intellectually inferior and will not be able to learn in traditional ways (Delpit, 2012). Delpit also questions the efficacy of the typical methods employed within remedial settings, as a slower pace and less class content do not logically cause lagging students to "catch-up" with students who begin ahead and move faster. In fact, one of the most intuitive yet harmful solutions for students who struggle academically is to teach them less. While this practice may be more viable for the instructor, what an academically struggling student would benefit from is learning *more* academic content, rather than less. Furthermore, teachers with low expectations are found to be less active in their classrooms, spend less time actually teaching, and more time disciplining. Delpit found that in predominantly low-income African American schools, students spent more time doing worksheets and being disciplined than receiving actual lessons. What these racially derived low expectations imply is that many educators are failing to acknowledge the abilities of their African American students because they struggle to rid themselves and their practice of socially normative racist perspectives of African Americans (Delpit, 2012). In turn, these low expectations act as self-fulfilling-prophecy because African Americans students suffer academically from these tactics, seemingly confirming the notion that they have lower abilities. Their academic performance actually expresses their experience of prejudice and unequal treatment.

The issue of school discipline is also thick with racism. According to Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, and Bachman (2008), African Americans are significantly more likely to experience school discipline than white students are, especially with regard to the most severe punishments such as suspensions and expulsion. In their study, they found that 55.7 percent of

African American males were suspended or expelled compared with 26.8 percent of white males. These findings are consistent with findings for females, where 42.6 percent of African American females were suspended or expelled compared with 11.6 percent of white females. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association's (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) identified that African American students are almost three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school compared to white students, and substantially more likely than students from other races. According to their report, "Overrepresentation in suspension and expulsion has been found consistently for African American students" by a multitude of studies (p. 854). While these statistics suggest an unequal distribution of discipline across races, further investigation into the numbers reveal that these higher rates of discipline for African American students may not be justified.

The most significant indicator of racism as it relates to school discipline is that African American students are disciplined at rates inconsistent with typical risk factors associated with school rule violations. For example, Wallace and colleagues (2008) found that discipline measures for African American students were higher than what socioeconomic or delinquency data typically predicts, and that African American students exclusively are disciplined regardless of risk factors. Similarly, the APA's Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) reviewed several studies where higher-income African American students with no criminal history were also disciplined at significantly higher rates than other students. Both these studies suggest greater school discipline of African American students cannot be explained by behavioral problems associated with poverty nor the rate at which these students engage in substance abuse, conduct disorder, and other criminal behavior that predict school discipline enforcement for other students. As

such, the argument that African American students receive more school discipline because they are actually more disruptive and delinquent in school is questionable. How then can this discrepancy be explained? While the study conducted by Wallace and colleagues (2008) did not measure discrimination or bias, they do assert, "There are both qualitative and quantitative data, that when analyzed does suggest that there are language, cultural, and other differences between many educators and Black youth that may help to account for race differences in both disciplinary and academic outcomes" (p. 59). Similarly, the American Psychological Association stated that, "Disproportionate discipline of students of color may be due to lack of teacher preparation in classroom management (Vavrus and Cole, 2002), lack of training in culturally competent practices (Ferguson, 2001; Townsend, 2000), or racial stereotypes (Bargh and Chartrand, 1999; Graham and Lowery, 2004)" (p. 854). As such, race, whether viewed through cultural misunderstandings, bias, or stereotyping, is more likely to influence an African American being disproportionately punished in school.

The potential influence of racial stereotyping on school discipline is particularly relevant to African American males who receive more punishment in school than any other student group. Pedro Noguera (2008) and others have described that the pervasive stereotype of African American males is one of violence, delinquency, and incompetence, and that this stereotype has influenced how African American males are treated. With regard to school discipline, Delpit (2012) found these negative stereotypes lead teachers and staff to feel more intimidated by African American males than by other students, and to perceive even their normative behavior as aggressive. With this distorted perception, it is likely that African American males in particular receive an unfair amount of school discipline due to their race and gender.

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What makes this unequal distribution of discipline relevant to educational outcomes is that school discipline has been found to have a strong negative correlation with poor school performance and wellbeing. According to the American Bar Association/National Bar Association (2001, as cited in Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, Buchman, 2008) suspensions and expulsions place students at an academic disadvantage because they are removed from school, their time spent engaging in classroom learning is decreased, and their time spent potentially unsupervised in the community is increased. Furthermore, a high correlation exists between suspensions and expulsions and a variety of negative outcomes such as substance abuse, delinquency, low academic performance, delayed graduation, and drop out (APA's Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Furthermore, schools with high rates of discipline enforcement are likely to have lower academic performance overall when compared with schools where students are punished less (APA's Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). In sum, African American students are placed at a disadvantage in school because they are punished more often and for less severe offenses. More troubling, however, is that the inordinate amount of discipline to which African American students are subjected may not be justified. In fact, it is likely to be the result of racial stereotyping and prejudice. Therefore, school discipline serves as one of the many avenues through which African American students are discriminated against, jeopardizing their academic performance.

In addition to the influence of race on educators and administrators, African American students themselves are victim of internalized racism in school. Various studies have shown that students who perceive, encounter, or anticipate racial discrimination are likely to struggle academically and behaviorally. According to Wong et al. (2013), perceptions of discrimination

are detrimental to a student's academic performance and psycho-emotional development, functioning as a risk factor to healthy development (Wong, Essles, Sameroff, 2013). These researchers found that perceptions of in-school discrimination led to decreases in achievement motivation, perceptions of self-competency, psychological resiliency, and self-esteem. They also found that discrimination led to an increase in feelings of anger, depressive symptomatology, and behavior problems. Furthermore, students' perceptions of future discrimination (with or without having perceived past encounters with discrimination) led them to disengage from school, lower their academic expectations, and associate more with individuals who did not value education. Students who perceived their own race or culture to be lower than others within the social hierarchy also had lower academic performance and educational attainment (Wong, Eccles, Sameroff, 2003). Because African American students exist within a society consumed by racist-smog, their likelihood of experiencing, perceiving, and anticipating racial discrimination is significant and their school success suffers as a result.

This research speaks to a concept known as internalized racism, where African American youth and members of other marginalized racial ethnic groups believe and accept the negative views and stereotypes greater society imposes upon them. As Delpit (2012) elaborates, "As a result of racist smog, many of our children have internalized all of the negative stereotypes inherent in our society's views of black people" (p. 14). As such, African American students are more likely to doubt their own abilities and are more likely to accept failure because they have been inundated with messages from their social environment that supports this. Students who have resigned themselves to (internalize) these messages of inferiority doubt their own abilities and employ two primary defense mechanisms. First these students will attempt to "disappear"

from the classroom. For example, students may withdraw from classroom participation, sit in the back of the classroom, wear a hood, and put their head on the desk, skip class, or drop out of school all together. Second, students will act out in class to distract the teacher and other students from academics, and draw attention to their other attributes. Both mechanisms are employed to avoid classroom learning where their perceived lack of ability may be confirmed. Therefore, contemporary racism not only influences how others perceive and treat African American students, but how many African Americans perceive and treat themselves and one another (Delpit, 2012).

Race also influences the academics of African American students through a phenomenon known as stereotype threat. Stereotype threat refers to a psychological process in which a person perceives that a common stereotype may be applicable to themselves, and this knowledge causes them additional stress and anxiety (Helgeson, 2012). This added pressure then acts to undermine their performance and inadvertently confirms the stereotype. Therefore, because a common stereotype exists that African Americans are intellectually inferior, or at least do not perform as well in school, this knowledge can strain the academic performance of African American students and misrepresent their inherent ability. Stereotype threat can even undermine the performance of students who attempt to reject and overcome negative perceptions of their racial group, as their performance is threatened by an acknowledgement that these forces exist. Therefore, contemporary racism functions as a "catch-22" for African American students, whose academics suffer when they both accept or reject negative social perceptions of their abilities.

Beyond the individual level, evidence of contemporary racism can also be found in the very structure, organization, and nature of American schools. The most explicit form of

institutional racism is the continuation of de facto racial segregation following the *Brown* decision. The failure to correct a system the Supreme Court of the United States unanimously found to be unequal represents a national acceptance of an educational system in which all children are not provided the same opportunity to learn. While the problem of segregation today is defended as an issue of fairness proportional to community wealth, the racial and economic injustices underpinning this argument remain (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As almost half of African American students live in poverty, de facto segregation in combination with a property-tax base funding structure for public schools automatically sentences these children to under-resourced schools and a lower quality of education (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Though the American school system no longer prescribes to a legal doctrine of racial segregation and inequality, Ladson-Billings (2006) explains, "But we must ask ourselves why funding disparities map so neatly and regularly onto the racial and ethnic realities of our schools" (p. 6). As such, many public schools in America are organized and structured in such a way that systematically denies African American students the full benefits of education and places them at an academic disadvantage.

In some contemporary literature (Ladson-Billings, 2009 and 2000; Foster, 1990; Siddle-Walker, 1996), advocates for African American education have rejected the argument that all-African American schools are inherently bad, and argue that the problem with school segregation is primarily an issue of wealth and funding (Trotter and Day, 2010). In fact, the idea of allowing "lucky" students to attend predominantly white schools through magnet programs or the other desegregation strategies is perceived by some as merely encouraging the institutional supremacy of whites, rather than attending to the more pressing issue that schools serving African American students are neglected and underfunded. Critical race theory, for example, proposes that funding disparities have been allowed to exist *because* of the racial separation of students. Therefore, the

primary mechanism for school funding supports the continuation of institutional racism, while also distorting the symbolic function of desegregation tactics into a scheme of white supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

To summarize, evidence of racism exists throughout the contemporary American public school system. Its presence acts to corrupt the practices of many professionals and undermine the success of African American students. As our society is inundated with "racist smog" and messages about African American inferiority, every level of academic participation is subject to infection by racism. With or without their knowledge, educators often lower their expectations of African American students, teach them less content, conduct non-engaging lessons, and teach remedially. Administrators are more likely to discipline African American students (and for less severe offenses) on the basis on cultural misunderstandings, stereotypes, and bias. On a sociopolitical level, institutional racism has been allowed to continue through the unequal distribution of school funding, masked in the guise of economic fairness, systematically robbing low-income African American neighborhoods the necessary funds to provide quality education. Most troubling of all, African American students themselves can fall victim to internalizing and accepting the racist-smog that consumes our society. When African American students perceive themselves as inferior, they are likely to doubt their own abilities, accept failure, withdraw or act out- all of which function to distort and deter their inherent capacities. African American students continue to receive differential treatment in their schools, jeopardizing their educational success in a variety of ways. As such, appreciating the role of racism can help account for much of the difficulty low-income African American students are experiencing in school, as they face a variety of barriers that other students do not.

2.4.2   Cultural Competency and Race Neutrality

Despite the many similarities between African American students and students of other races and cultures, African American students are unique in a variety of important ways.   However, understanding, supporting, and even admiring these differences is seldom practiced in schools (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Boykin and Tom, 1985; Tyack, 1974).   Some critics argue that one of the reasons African American students struggle in school is because of a pedagogical denial of African American culture, both its merits and historic challenges, and the adoption of seemingly race-neutral education (Ladson-Billings, 2000).   Yet, neither American society nor its schools are "race-neutral," and thus the denial of African American culture serves to rob these students of the cultural enrichment and educational relevancy other students receive.   It is arguable that schools serve as one of the primary enculturation mechanisms in our society, yet they are often void of an appreciation of the lives, experiences, and needs of African American children.   As such, due to their race and ethnic origin, these students are likely to encounter educators who lack sufficient cultural competency, leading them to experience differential and unequal school experiences.

To begin, it is important to establish that American schools do little to incorporate and understand African American culture.   This denial is most evident by the "one best system" philosophy within public education that emerged in the 19th century, when immigrants from a variety of backgrounds (though primarily western-European) were integrated with one another in schools (Tyack, 1974).   This cultural immersion and Americanization fueled the notion that diverse groups could successfully assimilate and thrive together regardless of origin, language, and culture.   Though the significance of the so-called "Melting Pot of America" should not be

diminished, it is important to recognize the limitations of the color "stew" that is America. To begin, the only people accepted into this melting pot were white (Tyack, 1974). Furthermore, these immigrants generally came from Europe; though they came from different countries with diverse cultures and traditions, the spectrum of these differences was hardly diffuse when compared to those of African origin (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Moreover, immigrants came to America with relative freedom, usually for the betterment of themselves and their families. Nevertheless, schools adopted the notion that education was void of cultural significance, failing to recognize that American schools were in fact fundamentally white and European in nature. As Ladson-Billings (2000) explains:

> [Schools] position themselves as culture-neutral when they actually support the learning of mainstream students … .Of course, the Americanization process considered only those immigrant and cultural groups from Europe. Indigenous people and people of African descent are not thought educable and therefore not part of the mainstream education discourse. (p. 207)

African Americans have been and continue to be educated in a Eurocentric manner. Much of the literature on cultural competency suggests that the historic and current inequality experienced by African Americans *within* their time in the United States is particularly influential on their academic performance and is not comparable to the experiences of others. Without delving into detail, recall the horrific treatment of African Americans that was described in the beginning of this chapter. In sum, African Americans were the only people in the history of the United States forcibly removed from their country of origin for the explicit purpose of labor exploitation (Franklin and Moss, 1988). African American slavery remained intact for nearly two and a half centuries, followed by another hundred years of segregation, oppression, and neglect. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s that African Americans began to be

allowed the same rights and privileges of white Americans. However, much of the political

fervor and enthusiasm to abolish racial inequality has since diminished, accounting for the slow

yet consistent progress African American people have made in recent decades. Despite these

gains, African Americans are still suffering wounds from the past, as evidenced by their

overrepresentation among the poor, mentally ill, homeless, incarcerated, drug addicts, physical

abusers, and victims of physical abuse and neglect (American Psychological Association, 2013).

As such, African American students today face many challenges and hardships (socially,

economically, and academically) that their white counterparts do not. Hence, the needs of

African American students are unique.

Yet, despite these unique needs, African Americans are expected to thrive in institutions

designed to meet the social, economic, and academic needs of more privileged youth who have

not endured centuries of oppression. The argument for desegregation in the landmark *Brown v.*

Board of Education (1954), for example, proposed *equality* between African Americans and

other students. However, equality has since been misinterpreted as "sameness," ignoring the

distinct qualities of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Most importantly,

however, the notion of sameness disregards the educational and social debt experienced by

African Americans throughout the history of the United States, contributing to their academic

demise. As Ladson-Billings (2000), creator of the concept of education debt (2006) explains:

> African American learners do not begin at the same place as middle-class white student
> either economically or socially, and because what we may value in African American
> culture differs what may be valued in school, applying the same 'remedy' may actually
> increase the education disparity. (p. 208)

Thus, the denial of African American culture in school results in a denial of the academic

disadvantage these students have faced historically and continue to face today. Therefore, without an adequate understanding of African American students and their lives, educators will be unable to engage with these students and prepare them for the social and economic realities they will encounter and must overcome due to their race.

Some of the education literature proposes that the educators of African American students should be equipped with a variety of additional skills in order to practice cultural competency in the classroom and to provide these students with the tools they need to succeed. For example, Delpit (2012) recommends that educators "provide children with the ego strength to challenge racist societal views of their competence and worthiness and that of their families and communities" (p. xix). She also proposes curricular improvements that "connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school" (p. 21) and teachers who can "create a sense of belonging for students – a sense that they belong in the 'club' of scholars and achievers; that school is for them" (p. 20). In her earlier work, Delpit (2006) suggests, "use of familiar metaphors, analogies, and experiences from the children's world to connect what children already know to school knowledge" (p. 226). Ladson-Billings has also outlined extensive recommendations for improving the cultural competency of schools (Ladson-Billings 2000, 2009). Some highlights include requiring teachers to undergo formal training in African American history and contemporary culture, and the use of culturally relevant practices where educators and administrators: 1) see their profession and African American students in high regard; 2) see themselves as a part of the community; 3) see themselves as artists, mining for students' brilliance rather than implanting knowledge; and 4) believe that all students can succeed (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In these examples, the importance of empowering students and paying tribute to the legacy and culture they bring to the classroom is emphasized. Not only is

culture an essential element to engaging and enriching the education of students, but it also serves as a mechanism for empowering students. As such, a lack of cultural competency in schools is the final reason why race can be a powerful influence on the academic performance of students.

In sum, issues related to race can potentially explain the educational experiences of African American students. Race is an influential force in a student's educational success. Unlike poverty, however, race alone is not the catalyst for educational differences, but rather how we respond to race is seen as the mechanism for education disenfranchisement.

2.5   THE INTERSECTION OF POVERTY AND RACE:

A VOID IN LITERATURE

Must has been written regarding the influence of poverty on education, and the influence of race on education, yet there is a dearth of research that has examined the intersection of race and poverty on education of low-income African American students. For example, in the United States Department of Education's public data, *no* information is provided for the achievement of low-income and higher-income students of the same race. Racial and ethnic achievement data were provided and income-based achievement data were provided, but within-group data were unavailable. In fact, in study after study reviewed in this thesis, African American students are referenced as a racial group, period. Being low-income and being African American was often discussed interchangeably.

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Furthermore, literature on poverty explains that African Americans disproportionately experienced poverty and were therefore more likely to suffer the consequences with which it is associated, but little attention is paid to the differences in experiences of low-income African American students when compared with their higher-income peers. There may be variations in the ways poverty undermines education due to the synergism of race and poverty. As such, this study seeks to uncover themes in the experiences of low-income African American students.

3.0   METHODS

3.1   RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1.1   Research Questions

The goal of this thesis is to understand the experiences of low-income African American students and the factors that lead to positive academic experiences, viewed through the lens of education debt.   How students and teachers perceive and define their experiences is critical to understanding how they believe they can achieve educational success.   As such, my research inquiry is two-fold and attempts to define the problems, as well as potential solutions to these problems, based on the experiences and perceptions of students and teachers participating in this study.   To this end, I address the following research questions:

1. How do students and teachers describe the barriers to students' academic success?
2. What factors do students and teachers identify in the classroom, school, and community environment that facilitate student engagement and classroom learning?

Because attempts to address the poor achievement of low-income African American students have been largely unsuccessful to date, a renewed understanding of the problem, derived from those experiencing the phenomenon first hand, is essential.   Therefore, from the

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perspective of education debt, I am interested in how students and teachers understand and describe the impact of intergenerational social and educational inequality on student performance, and the behavioral and affective responses to these conditions. The open-ended nature of these questions supports discussion of many relevant systems, most notably the classroom/teacher relationship, school structure, community, and family. Through my literature review, it became evident that the impact and perpetuation of education debt, as well as the accomplishment of educational success, are manifest through multi-system interaction, both in and out of the school setting. As such, this thesis seeks to identify commonalities and differences of perceptions with regard to multiple systems and their impact on school and classroom experiences and challenges.

By examining the perceptions and experiences of students and teachers, I hope to gain an understanding of the unique challenges faced by these students, and how these challenges are being addressed within their school. As Wilson and Corbett (2007) have found from interviewing thousands of students and school staff, the perceptions of those participating in public education, most notably students, are highly reliable and mirror findings from multiple other methods. Therefore, my intention is to develop a relevant understanding of student and teacher perceptions, and identify what they believe to be effective approaches to engaging students and facilitating their learning.

3.1.2 Research Approach

I used an interpretive/constructionist approach to answer these questions. This epistemological orientation challenges the notion of objective reality and posits that understandings of the social

environment are "contextually and experientially based" (Wajda, E., 2011, p. 276). As such, I adopted the notion that social reality is socially constructed, and cannot be divorced from values, culture, time, and space. With this in mind, I focused my analysis on the subjective contexts and experiences of students and teachers, or more precisely, subjective interpretations of their own experiences. I then assessed these interpretations with all the values and experiences that encompass me and my lived experience.

It is therefore important for the reader to have an understanding of the community and school context within which data were collected, as well as who I am. A description of the research setting is provided in detail below. First, I describe who I am and elements of my worldview that I perceive as relevant to my interpretation and analysis. I am a 22-year-old white female who has recently finished her required baccalaureate coursework in a social work program decided by the Council on Social Work Education. I grew up in an upper-middle class neighborhood, less than one mile from the school and community being studied. Despite my proximity to the community in this study, little or no interaction between the neighborhoods took place, as mine was a wealthy white community, the other a low-income African American community. I believe, to some extent, growing up close to the border of two racially and economically segregated neighborhoods piqued my initial interest and curiosity about race. I also attended a public high school in the same district as the school in this study. While I lived physically closer to the school under study, my residence was part of a feeder pattern to a public school further away. My high school was located in a middle-class white neighborhood, close to where I currently live, and served a mix of racially and economically diverse students. My experience in school, however, was very negative. I recall the school being overwhelmingly large, punitive, and racially segregated. From what I observed, my honors courses were attended

by white upper-class students, while the African American and low-income white students attended mainstream courses. Most of my friends were keenly aware of this segregation, yet this fact seemed to trouble me more than others, and I have not been able to forget those experiences. I also believe I experienced a great deal of white privilege as a rebellious adolescent who almost never received disciplinary actions and was permitted to pass honors classes with little effort. I am certain that my experience in public school is what fuels my interest in social equality and education, and I cannot help but compare my experience to those of the students in this study.

It is also important to note that I have no first-hand experience living in poverty. Both of my parents have been employed and have remained married to one another throughout my life, and my mother had the opportunity to take time off from work to raise my siblings and me. In addition, most of my social relationships are with middle-class people, of mixed races, who have a great deal of post-secondary education. My understanding of poverty comes from four years of higher education studying poverty from a social work perspective, as well as working with individuals living in poverty in a professional helping role. These experiences have led me to what I believe is appreciation for the struggles people face living in poverty, and an academic and professional understanding of what those struggles might be.

3.2   SETTING

3.2.1   Community

This research was conducted at a large public school serving an urban, low-income, and primarily African American neighborhood in a major U.S. city. This neighborhood is home to roughly 9,200 residents, 3,000 of whom are children. As a community made-up of 95 percent African Americans, this neighborhood has a rich history of African American occupancy, and was first inhabited by upper-middle class African Americans in the early 1900s. The neighborhood was racially and economically diverse until the 1950s, when residents from a neighboring low-income and predominantly African American community were displaced, many of whom settled here. As the economic and racial diversity of the neighborhood declined, white and upper-middle class African American residents began to move elsewhere, particularly after the Fair and Equal Housing Act of 1968[7]. The population of the neighborhood took a sharp decline over the next several decades, dropping from 32,000 in 1950 to less than 15,000 by 1980. (Allegheny County, 2010)

Hard economic times have continued to plague the remaining residents of this racially segregated neighborhood. In 2011, 50 percent of the community's children lived below the federal poverty threshold, while 87 percent were considered low-income (Homewood Children's Village, 2012). Furthermore, 72 percent of the families with children were headed by single parents, and less than half the residents owned their own home or vehicle. This neighborhood is

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[7] Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 which prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental, and financing of housing due to race, religion, national origin, gender (added in 1974), and ability (added in 1988).

also home to one of the highest violent crime rates in the city, and as of 2007, the highest homicide rate. Despite these difficult conditions, revitalization efforts have begun, many of which have been organized by local residents. An influx of social services, children's programs, and community and cultural organizations began in earnest during the past five years. The impact of this revitalization effort has yet to be realized, but a strong and optimistic climate is apparent to most who visit this struggling neighborhood (Homewood Children's Village, 2012).

3.2.2 School

The school where this study has taken place will be referred to as "East Side Academy" to protect the identities of the participants. East Side Academy is comprised of 97 percent African American students, 82 percent of whom are low-income, as indicated by free and reduced lunch eligibility (A+ Schools, 2011). The school is designated "high-poverty" according to federal guidelines and receives additional district support as a result (Center of Education Statistics, 2012). In 2011, East Side Academy was the lowest performing school in the district, with only 25.4 percent of 11th grade students scoring "Proficient" or "Advanced" in reading and 7.2 percent scoring "Proficient" or "Advanced" in math on state assessment tests (A+ Schools, 2011). In response to these low test scores, East Side Academy underwent major reform and restructuring prior to the 2011-2012 school year.

As part of this reform effort, a struggling middle school and a high school were closed, with their students redirected to East Side Academy to join the high school students from the previous year. As such, the school was transformed from a traditional high school into a 6th

through 12th grade "academy" where middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12) programs were operated in one building but as separate programs. In addition to the school consolidation, both middle school and high school students were divided into single-sex programs and matching gender-specific principals were assigned to each student body. Similarly, high school and middle school teachers were assigned to either the young men's or the young women's academy (as they came to be known) and worked in "cohorts" with teachers from other disciplines who all taught the same group of students. The intention was for the four sub-academies (middle school girls, middle school boys, high school girls, high school boys) to function somewhat independently within a larger academy context and create a more intimate and personal school environment for the students. Other changes applicable to all grades (6-12) included extending the school year by several weeks, instituting uniforms, and initiating a rotating 90-minute block schedule.

A variety of other measures were also taken to attend to the unique needs of students. For example, teaching fellows, graduate student interns, and AmeriCorps volunteers were recruited to assist students and teachers. These paraprofessionals, along with school faculty, were also encouraged to use creative and nontraditional methods for engaging students and parents. College preparation and SAT resources were made available to upper-level high school students, and in-school vocational programs were expanded and improved. It is also important to appreciate this reform effort in the larger context of the school district, which was experiencing an unprecedented reduction in state funding. As a result, many district teachers and staff were furloughed or displaced and many teachers were redirected to work at schools in which they had not been previously assigned, including East Side Academy. As such, many teachers and staff

working at East Side Academy were new to the school and the community, with some working there involuntarily.

The school reform was met with mixed reviews. According to local newspapers, many community members were hopeful the school changes would bring about improvement, while others were skeptical that the changes would have the intended effect. The most scrutinized element of the reform, however, was the single-sex division of students. Not only were the empirical, ethical, and symbolic reasons for the gender segregation called into question, but the legality of the school's authority to provide a coeducational alternative on a limited basis was also debated. In addition, the short amount of time provided between the approval of the reform and the beginning of the school year (less than six months) was disconcerting to some, and families and professionals debated whether the school would be ready to receive students when the fall term began. Despite the public controversy, East Side Academy opened its doors at the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, whether or not it was prepared or legally sanctioned to do so.

As many critics had anticipated, poor and/or incomplete planning, coupled with an impending legal battle challenging the single-sex division of students, forced the school to return to a traditional model within the first three months of the school year. During the time that the majority of reform changes were active, the school was plagued by disorganization and chaos. As several local newspapers reported, most students did not have schedules or lockers for weeks after the school year began, classroom assignments became a "free-for-all," and many students reported being housed in the auditorium in lieu of class. Furthermore, the school's computer system was nonoperational for the first month of school, making students' schedules, grades,

attendance, emergency contacts, and other school data inaccessible to school staff (Chute and Navrati, 2011).

In response to the situation at East Side Academy, the principals were either fired or resigned, and a single new principal was hired after weeks of no school leadership. In addition, the single-sex classes and teacher cohorts were dissolved, along with the allowance for creative student and parent engagement methods. The remainder of the school year consisted of stabilizing the school environment and operating the school as normally as possible (Chute and Navratil, 2012).

The multiple changes and school disorganization experienced by the students and teachers participating in this study undoubtedly had an impact on the data we collected. However, these circumstances, brought about by major school reform, are not unique to this school. In fact, schools made up of predominantly low-income African American students have been the focus of most of the nation's recent school reform efforts, and these students are more likely than others to experience similar chaos. Nevertheless, more traditional school experiences did occur at East Side Academy, especially after much of the reform was abandoned. This variation allowed our participants to be exposed to multiple schooling methods (however short-lived) while also experiencing conditions that may be more common. In a final note, this study has focused primarily on the high school program within the school, while attending to the middle school in relation to its impact on the experiences of the high school students.

3.3   DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study were collected through a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project facilitated at the East Side Academy. CBPR is a collaborative, social justice-oriented approach to research.   As Jacobson and Rugeley (2007) explain, this method "engag[es] marginalized community residents as valued participants in decision-making and community solution-building processes around issues that concern their lives" (p. 22). As this research pertains to low-income African American students, it was a critical component of the CBPR approach to engage the students from East Side Academy in the research process and empower them to take an active role in the creation of research designed to improve their school experiences. The project had two guiding objectives: train high school juniors and seniors in qualitative interviewing techniques, and with the help of these students, collect data documenting the perceptions and experiences of students and stakeholders at East Side Academy.

The CBPR group held meetings during after school hours, hosted by an on-site afterschool program. The group was facilitated by students and faculty from a nearby university's social work program, and had approval from that university's Institutional Review Board. University researchers consisted of one faculty member, two Ph.D. students, one MSW student, and one BASW student (myself); all of us were women – four white, and one African American. Student recruitment occurred during the month of September with the university researchers visiting 11th and 12th grade classrooms to present the opportunity to join the CBPR team. The potential academic and advocacy benefits of participation were explained, along with the opportunity for students to use this project as a topic for their district-required graduation research project. From our recruitment, several East Side Academy students requested to join

our research team and two students remained on the team throughout the school year. One of the student researchers was a 12th grade male, the other an 11th grade female; both students were African American. The team met twice a week throughout the majority of the school year, and student researchers were compensated $5.00 per session. In addition, student researchers were provided training and mentorship in the research process, interviewing, analysis, and presentation.

Data for this project came from three primary sources: individual interviews, focus group interviews, and observational field notes. Interview questions were developed by all members of the research team through a collaborative discussion process. Both university and student researchers collected data by conducting and recording in-depth individual and group interviews. Student researchers met privately with their friends and teachers, while university researchers interviewed other students and teachers identified through snowball and availability sampling methods. University researchers also recorded detailed observational field notes after every session and interview, and met regularly to reflect on and discuss the project.

The resulting data used in this thesis consists of 24 interviews: 14 individual student interviews, six individual teacher interviews, and four student focus group interviews. Eight of these interviews were conducted by student researchers. The interview sample consists of 15 participants, as four students were interviewed multiple times. Student participants included two 9th grade females, one 10th grade female, one 11th grade female, three 12th grade females, and two 12th grade males. All students were African American. Teacher participants included three faculty teachers, two graduate student teaching fellows, and one afterschool teacher. The sample included three African American males, one white male, one African American female, and one white female. It is unclear whether teacher participants had voluntarily selected to work at the

school, or were involuntarily assigned, although interview data suggest many teachers who were interviewed were voluntary and at least one was not. In addition, I generated 24 sets of field notes, originally drafted on notepaper during field visits, then transferred and expanded digitally within 24 hours. I wrote all my field notes, which contain information pertaining to observations, non-verbatim quotes, and reflections. I did not use the other researchers' field notes for these analyses.

3.4   DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all data sources were analyzed through a systematic process of coding, memoing, and discussion with advising faculty. I began this process by familiarizing myself with the data, reading all interviews and field notes. I wrote memos about my initial impressions and emerging themes, and discussed these memos with advising faculty. I then inductively developed a number of broad research questions, which were refined and finalized through literature consultation. Next, I began to code the interviews. Using Microsoft Word and Excel software, I assigned descriptive codes to every clear statement and organized codes into thematic categories. I then placed all data relevant to my research question into a separate document, and repeated the memoing and coding process. Emerging themes were discussed with advising faculty, and codes were then organized into concise categories and relationship frameworks. Field notes were consulted to contextualize interview data and provide insight to my emerging findings.

Results are organized as follows: students' perspectives are described first, after which teachers' perspectives are described. Both student and teacher perspectives are organized into two sections corresponding with my two research questions: 1) Factors that undermine students' success, and 2) factors that promote students' success. Student and teacher perspectives are substantiated by direct quotes obtained from interview transcripts that were selected due to their relevancy and representative quality. As such, quotes are indicative of similar statements made by other student participants that were not included in this thesis. Elaborations and summaries of student and teacher perspectives are provided following each identified factor. The term "educators" will be used henceforth in this thesis to refer to all school professions (e.g. teachers, administrators, staff, and security personnel), as participants often discussed these professionals interchangeably, while the term "teachers" will only be used when a clear professional distinction is make (e.g. teacher participants). Results are then discussed in the context of the literature and education debt in the final chapter.

4.0   FINDINGS

This chapter presents relevant findings from student and teacher interviews. Findings addressing each research question have been organized into thematic categories, and student and teacher interviews are discussed separately. The chapter begins by describing what students identified as the primary barriers to their academic success, exploring the themes of behavior problems, educators' inability to manage students, a school-wide discipline rather than academic focus, and a lack of culturally-competent educators. Next, the factors students identify that lead them to have positive school experiences are presented, which include authoritative yet caring and supportive educators, structured small group collaboration, and extracurricular and recreational activities. Third, teachers' perceptions of the barriers their students face that limit their academic success are described, pertaining to themes of poor administrative support, inconsistencies in school, and negative out of school experiences and influences. Finally, the factors teachers identified that can overcome these barriers and lead their students to have positive school experiences are presented and include professional relationship-building and inter-personal skills, as well as an in-depth approach to cultural competency.

4.1 STUDENT IDENTIFIED BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

4.1.1 Behavior Problems

Every student participant identified student behavior problems as one of the barriers to academic success. One male student described this behavior as, "Triflin. Like, it's just nasty. Loud. Jumping off the walls, turnin' off lights, throwin' books. Just being destructive." The student followed his remarks by adding, "That's just something they developed out in the streets." While describing her experiences in a single-sex classroom, a female student said, "Half of the girls are doing their work, the other half is not. There's dancing, playing music, doing makeup, and that's pretty much it." One male student explained that this disruptive behavior is employed by students as a mechanism to avoid classroom learning. As he explains, "'Cause you know, you got a lot of people in here [who] don't wanna' learn. Well, they want to learn, they just don't feel like being taught." He then describes a typical classroom scenario where students intentionally misguide classroom discussion: "So, they go in our class, you know what I'm saying, we'll get on topic, and then once somebody say something to get 'em off topic, that's the whole topic of the conversation for like the whole 30 minutes. Teacher, duh-duh-duh-duh, you know what I'm saying, trying to get us all calmed down, and once everybody calm back down, he'll start the conversation back up again, and somebody say something irrelevant again! It's just people trying – not trying to learn." These statements and examples are representative of students' recognition of presence of behavior problems exhibited by their classmates, and their insight that these behaviors are developed from out-of-school experiences and used, potentially, as a mechanism to avoid classroom learning.

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Classroom misbehavior is described by students as both a distraction to their learning and contributing to their academic failure. One female student described, "Some of us will just sit in there, trying to learn, but we can't learn, because the kids keep talking." Another student explained that she believed her grades to be slipping because of students misbehaving in her class. As she said, "I feel like I'm getting behind in science and math. In math, it's because of the behaviors, the way the kids act, how they, like, how they talk, how they speak, what they do." I then asked her, "So, it makes it hard for the teacher to teach?" and she responded, "Yeah." Another female student also believed that behavior problems were affecting their classroom learning, as she said, "…and, once again, there's girls that like to talk and talk and talk. So, we learn some things, but not as many times as I think we should." Represented by these examples, students perceive behavior problems to impede their learning, cause them to get behind in school, undermine the ability of teachers to deliver their lessons, and ultimately, become a barrier to their academic success.

A common solution to the problem of misbehaving students, proposed by many but not all students, was to separate misbehaving students from the rest of the class. While such a solution is not advocated by this thesis, the position many students take on the removal of misbehaving students substantiates how critical a barrier behavior problems are perceived to be to academic success. One male student expressed his view that, "You gotta' separate those people to make this school a better place. Send 'em somewhere like [an alternative school] where they, where they, where they should be at." A female student recommended, "I think what's gonna' make the school better is just separating the good from the bad." This recommendation was given by a number of students we interviewed. Similarly, another female student advocated, "Unless we get new principals, and they take them kids out of our school,

then yeah, we'll be gravy!" These perceptions indicate that the role of behavior problems is so severe within the school and classroom setting that many believe the elimination of misbehavior to be the solution to the school's overall poor performance.

In sum, students perceive student behavior problems as omnipresent within the school setting and unacceptable. These behaviors are described as both compromising to their individual academic success, as well as to the teachers' ability to engage students in classroom learning. These statements also indicate that not all students misbehave, but that all students suffer academically as a result. Finally, many students believe the presence of misbehaving students to be the primary cause of the school's poor performance.

4.1.2   Educators' Inability to Manage Students

Concomitant with their critiques of fellow students' behavior problems in the school, the students we interviewed were dissatisfied with the lack of control exhibited by educators, and perceived that they could be managing students more effectively. When discussing students' misbehavior, one female student explained, "But I think it all depends on the teacher. I don't ever think it was the students' fault, because if the teacher has the class under control, we would be learning." She continued, "I really can't see it changing too much, but if we get a new principal that knows how to discipline, I think it will change." In this example, the student perceives that her educators lack the skills necessary to manage students' behavior, thus allowing the presence of behavior problems within the classroom. This student also indicates that these behavior problems would be manageable for a better-trained professional. A similar statement was made by a male student, who said, "I really don't care if they [i.e. misbehaving students] are

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in our school, for real, but they need to learn how to keep them under control. That's all." Another female student said, "The teachers, they're not doing, you know what I'm saying, what they're supposed to. Students are going chaotic." These statements indicate that students perceive the educators to be responsible for managing student behavior problems but that they are ineffective in doing so. Many students also perceived the academic impediment caused by behavior problems to be the fault of educator's inability to manage their students. Furthermore, students provided little sympathy for the challenges their educators face because they perceive the control of students as achievable with the proper skill set. In this way, students perceive the inability of some educators to be a barrier to their academic success because they are unable to mitigate the distractions caused by student behavior problems.

Perceptions of dissatisfaction with educators' performance were described by students in a number of ways. Some students believed the normal functioning and overall quality of educators as compromised by their inability to manage behavior problems. One female student described, "Sometimes they're like, unorganized, like they'll lose our work, or, don't have enough copies." Another female student complained, "[In] this school, I'm getting bad – I'm just flying through, because they're not pushing me." In addition, many students complained that educators who could not manage their students would devote inordinate amounts of time toward unsuccessful attempts at disciplining students while detracting time from teaching. As one female student explained, "It's not fair. Some of the teachers aren't even – like they're trying to get the kids that are talking to stop talking and they won't go on with the class… They're still focusing on the kids that are talking, and they're just stopping midway through their lectures or when they're trying to explain something." Another female student provided an example of an educator who had stopped disciplining students whatsoever. As she described,

"We'll be playing music, and dancing, and the teachers will be going along with it." This student, who admittedly participated in the misbehavior she described, was simultaneously distressed by her educator's lack of discipline. As she said, "I think that it's okay for it, but it's not okay every day. Like, it could be okay for Fridays, because like, that's the last day of the week. But it's not okay for every day because that's making us more behind on what we need to be up on." In the above examples, the students describe the impact of educators' inability to manage their students on the students' academic success. They perceive some educators as having become overwhelmed and disorganized, while others struggle to create academically challenging environments, some detract time away from teaching, while others simply give-up making productive use of school time all together. Overall, the students perceive the school professionals as responsible for educating students. However, they also see educators' inability to manage students as detrimental to students learning and a barrier to academic success.

While it may be unfair to assume that educators are underperforming, since the behavior problems at the school may be more severe than at other schools, some students provided insight that students' dissatisfaction may be warranted. One female student, who had previously attended the highest performing school in the district, compared her experiences at her last school to her experience at East Side Academy, explaining, "We had stricter teachers [there]. The teachers over there will kick you out [for misbehaving]. They'll either kick you out, or write you up. And, here, they, they give you a warning here. Like, 'please stop talking'. When they try to kick you out, you're gonna say, 'no, I'll start listening' and then they'll let you [stay], and then you keep talking again, and then they're just like, 'I'll write you a referral.'" Another female student, who had attended a different school the previous year, also compared her experiences at that school to East Side Academy. As she described, "Last year it was a little bit

of, a little bit of everything, but at the same time, it wasn't as much drama, and it wasn't as much, like, dancing and music, like, usually everybody'd be in their seats participating. Not doing all that makeup stuff. And like, most of the teachers here, some of 'em just stay on their computers." These examples suggest some students perceive the overall quality and abilities of their educators to manage students as less adequate than their experiences at other schools they attended.

To summarize, while students recognized behavior problems as one of the primary barriers to their academic success, they perceive educators as being responsible for diffusing these problems. Yet, many appear incapable of doing so, especially when compared to students' experiences at other schools. Students believed that the school's professionals who were unable to manage students were contributing to the presence of behavior problems at East Side Academy. Furthermore, students believed that educators who struggled with managing misbehaving students also struggled with teaching because those professionals were more likely to be overwhelmed, were unable to create stimulating and challenging environments, had less time to devote to teaching, and some had disengaged from teaching all together.

4.1.3   A Focus on Discipline Rather than Academics

The majority of students interviewed also believed that their school experiences were inundated with discipline measures and their academics suffered as a result. As described previously, educators' inability to engage in effective student management led many students to experience more discipline-focused attention, however unsuccessful, than academic attention. The example of a school professional focusing more on misbehaving students than on students who want to

learn, as stated by a student above, suggests that in many instances academics are undermined by time and energy spent on discipline measures. Additional dimensions of how discipline undermines academic success were also provided by students.

First, students perceived the enforcement of specific non-academic school policies to be the focus of many educators, rather than academics, classroom learning, and behavior problems. One female student complained explicitly about these priorities by saying, "I mean, some of the teachers focus more on – we're not in uniform, or our phones, iPods, 'why you in the hallway without a note?' rather than 'Where's your homework? Go to class right now.' The important stuff." Another female student explained her beliefs about the enforcement of non-academic policies by saying, "But I think them wearing uniforms, it will affect the education because they are more focused on uniforms instead of the work." The interviewer asked, "So the uniforms are a distraction, you mean?" The student answered, "Yeah, to the principals and the teachers and stuff." The interviewer clarified with the student by saying, "You mean they're focused on just making sure everyone's wearing the uniform and not on more important things like, are you learning, and-" The student interjected, "Schoolwork, yeah, more effective discipline." These examples represent many students' belief that the enforcement of non-academic school policies took precedence over classroom learning. As they explain, the lack of attention paid to academics due to the focus on rule enforcement ultimately created a barrier to students' academic success.

Second, students perceived many of the penalties for disobeying non-academic rules as detrimental to their academic success. When describing the penalties for being late to class, one female student explained, "It's too many people on one staircase and some people just stand there and talk, and people gotta rush to class, and [then] it will be a hall sweep." The interviewer

then asked, "And so what happens if you get caught in a hall sweep?" The student responded, "Um, you get sent home. Like if you're late to class." Another female student described the penalties for arriving to school late, "I think if you come in like, 9:30, you have – you can't come in to the school, like you gotta go back home." The academic implications of being sent home due to discipline measures and how this related to the school's block schedule (i.e. 90-minute class and a rotating schedule), were described by one female student who remarked, "It's like, if you miss one day of school, it's like you miss two days' worth of work. It's hard to catch back up." Another student described her own experience being sent home twice in one day due to dress code violations, "Well, the uniforms, I got sent home today – Because I came to school with a black collared shirt. And then they sent me home, and I came back with my black collared shirt [still] on, but my, my, uh, school shirt on my arm. And they told me, 'Either put it on or go back home.' And I said, 'I'll put it on, but can I wait until I get in?' So they said, 'You can just go home.' So I went home – went home again, put the shirt on, then came back to school, and they finally let me in. And it was already second block." In this example, the student described arriving at school on time but not being allowed to enter to building twice due to dress code violations, causing her to miss over 90 minutes of class time.

The counter-educational effects of these rule enforcements were understood and criticized by some students. One female student in particular said, "[They] claim that they want to keep kids in school, but then, want to suspend 'em, send 'em to in-house [detention], go home, and you know, all that stuff." In these examples, the penalties for disobeying non-academic and non-behavioral school policies is described by students as decreasing their attendance and time devoted to academics. Furthermore, some students recognize the counter-educational role of

certain rule enforcement penalties and believe that this focus on discipline acts as a barrier to their academic success by decreasing their classroom learning.

Third, many students perceived that the discipline focus of the school was generally ineffective and these measures were not bringing about the change necessary to improve students' learning. Not only did students believe the focus on discipline reduced professional and student attention from academics, but that the discipline itself was not improving academics either. Almost all the students who perceived the discipline policies to be ineffective were students who had attended the school before the 2011 school reform, when many of these non-academic policies where established (See: Methods, Setting). These students provided insight into their perceptions that many of these new discipline measures were not having the intended effect. As one female student said, discussing the lack of impact from the new policies, "No. Ah, I think it's the same, the same stuff as last year, you know, nobody's learning anything… Just like last year… When I was here last year, there was kids who'd throw books and pencils and staplers, uh, staplers across the room. And they still do that this year." She then explained why she thought the discipline policies were ineffective, "I mean, if the teacher sees it, they give 'em detentions, or they write referrals, but it never affects the students. They still come back the next day. They don't go to detention. Nothing happens." Another student remarked that she thought many of these policies were superficial in nature. As she said, "But I don't understand why they claim, they're changing [our school] just because they think they change the name – well, they trying to change the name, our clothes, and take our phones and pat us down like we're in jail, that it's going to change something." She confirmed her notions by adding, "That doesn't change nothing. It's still the same school."

Fourth, students also believed that inconsistencies in following through with school discipline policies, in part because of the changing policies within the school (See: Methods, Setting), caused students to struggle with compliance to school rules, making them more likely to be punished and their academics to suffer. One example of how inconsistencies within the school setting were detrimental to students' compliance was provided by a female student who said, "There's no control in the building, no, no, you don't know who's in charge. Staff is in-and-out, you don't know who to listen to. So, nobody knows the rules, for real." A male student explained, "Then, like, they set rules and don't follow through. One minute – like uniform. We're supposed to have uniform every day, or 'I'm suspending and sending you home'. We both sittin' here, ain't got no uniform on. I ain't heard the teachers drop that once. But then I'll probably come in next week, then it's 'turn around, go home.' Or, 'give me your phone, or you're getting suspended.'" In this last example, the student explained how inconsistencies in rule enforcement led to confusion with rule compliance, and made students susceptible to disciplinary measures. In his example, it appears that school rules were selectively enforced. While a student who was quoted previously explained being sent home (twice) for dress code violations, students participating in other interviews were admittedly out of uniform having received no punishment. As the punishments for rule violations undermine student success by taking them out of school, inconsistencies in rule enforcement work against students' academic success by miscommunicating school expectations. Therefore, the fourth reason students perceived a discipline focus to be detrimental to their academic success is because the discipline system was inconsistently enforced, leading many students to break school rules and be punished by having their class time reduced.

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The fifth and final way students perceived a disciplinary rather than academic focus within the school as detrimental to their academic success was because this model failed to acknowledge and encourage good behavior and academic excellence. In one example, a female student discussed her interactions with one of the principals, saying, "Because [the principal] say that she only see 20 percent of people doing what they need to do, and she wants *everybody* to improve, so that's what we – we've been doing." When the interviewer asked her, "Does she give any recognition to the students who have been doing what they need to be doing?" she replied, "No." In this example, the student perceived the principal to be implying all students were sub-standard and in need of improvement, while identifying clearly that only 80 percent of students were actually deserving of this criticism. While the practice of seeking improvement for all students could be considered inclusive and positive, the student interpreted the principal's statement to mean that she does not acknowledge well performing students.

In another example, a student who described herself as having the highest grade point average in her class explained how she recently published a poem about living in a nearby public housing community. As she said, "And, my poem that got published, it got blown up, so it's on like a poster board and I have it at home. They put it up in [a different school in the district], Children's Hospital, and the museum. So, I was kinda' happy. And it was just saying how everybody is just saying how [the housing project] is a bad place, but really [it] isn't exciting at all. People are leaving, and the houses are getting boarded up, because there's nobody living in them." While this student demonstrates advanced language arts skills and ambition, what is significant about her story is that her own school had not acknowledged her poem. In fact, she said that a different school, rather than her own, had displayed her work. When this same student was interviewed later about one of the principals, she perceived her to be overly punitive

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and explained, "I'm just going to avoid her." In this example, the student perceives herself to be highly motivated and bright but has received little support or acknowledgement from her own school for this. Furthermore, she indicates she avoids the principal because she does not perceive this principal to be anything other than a disciplinarian. These last two examples represent students' perception that a focus on discipline acts as a barrier to academic success because it detracts from acknowledging and supporting good behavior and alternative forms of academic excellence.

In sum, students perceive a school-wide focus on discipline to be detrimental to their academic success in six key ways. The first reason relates to students' perceptions that many educators were ineffective at managing students and could not enforce discipline without compromising their professional abilities. The dominant focus on discipline is therefore perceived to increase educators' likelihood of functioning poorly. Students also saw non-academic and non-behavioral rule enforcement as the primary focus of many educators, taking time and resources away from academic enrichment. Third, students perceived the punishments for discipline violations to compromise their academic performance by removing them from needed school instructional time. Fourth, students perceived the discipline policies not to improve behavior or academic performance, and thus to do little to support students' success. Fifth, students perceived the rules and discipline system as difficult to comply with due to its inconsistency, making them more susceptible to the academic impediments imposed by punishments. Finally, students perceived the school-wide focus on discipline shifted attention away from well-performing students and failed to acknowledge or encourage them. Overall, however, students did not disregard the importance of discipline. In fact, they advocated for an increase in discipline. What the students describe is a belief that the nature and implementation,

as well as how it became the focus of educators, was what made discipline detrimental to their learning and therefore functioned as a barrier to academic success.

4.1.4 A Lack of Culturally Competent Educators

Many students described a lack of cultural competency on the part of their teachers and school administrators. Indications of a lack of cultural competence are derived from students' perceptions that many of the school's professionals could not understand and relate to them, making it difficult for students to learn and be successful in school. As one male student said, "Certain teachers can't teach, 'cause they – they can't relate to us, uh, I could just go on for days." The same student explained, later in the interview, his experiences with a teacher he described as someone who did not understand him, "I don't think she really knows how to teach me. She – I don't know – she don't know how to get stuff across. Like she'll say something, but when somebody else will get it, and then I'll be like…? And then they [a student] will tell me, and then I'll get it. You know what I'm saying?" In this example, the student describes his teacher as unable to teach due to her inability to communicate with and relate to him effectively. A female student told us, "Like, you don't know them. Like, you don't know. Personally, none of the teachers here know what any of the students are capable of. Because they haven't actually seen what the kids been through, and been in the 'hood." In this example, the student perceives that her teachers' lack an appreciation for her and her fellow students experiences, particularly those related to living in poverty, and that this lack of understanding leads many educators to underestimate the abilities of their students.

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Another student explained, "You know what I don't like? Is when teachers compare us to their kids. They compare, like, 'Oh, my daughter would of did this'- we ain't your kids! When they compare us to their kids, I'm like, 'we're not your kids, so don't keep comparing us to your kids'." A fellow student in the focus group responded, "'Cause we grew up in the 'hood!" In this example, the students perceive that their teachers do not appreciate their unique experiences and lack an understanding of the implications of growing up in poverty. A teacher drawing comparisons between their students and their own children was perceived by these students to imply that the teacher believes the two groups are similar, therefore failing to recognize the characteristics and life circumstances that make the students unique. Throughout every interview, students consistently described themselves as being "from the 'hood" and explained that much of their individuation derived from this fact and caused a number of problems between them and school professionals. Many of the examples provided by students indicate they perceive living in poverty or a poverty concentrated area to be significant to their life and identity, and that this factor is one of the primary sources of cultural misunderstandings between the students and their teachers. These students explain that teachers who cannot mitigate or recognize these differences often struggle relating and communicating effectively in the classroom, therefore creating a barrier to students' academic success.

In other cases, a lack of cultural competence led many students *not* to feel respected and valued by their educators. In one example, provided by a male student, he describes being judged and stereotyped by one of the principals, "When I first came here, he stereotyped me. Like, off of what I was wearing, off of…. basically off of last year [he was involved in the juvenile justice system the previous year]. Which wasn't cool. Um, people said I caused fights. But I didn't really cause fights. He just – he think I'm part of some big old cartel. And, I ain't

like that, for real for real." In this example, the student describes feeling stereotyped, experiencing prejudice, and not being respected as he believed this principal to presume he was a bad student due to his appearance. Another female student also described her interactions with a different principal, saying, "She treats us like we're retarded. Like, she'll really talk to you like you're really retarded. Like, when I see people talking to her, it's like, 'you're not allowed to go through this entrance. Go through the other one!' I'm like, are you really talking to me? It just, something that, I don't know." The interviewer then asked the student, "So you don't feel respected?" The student responded, "No. I don't feel no respect here, myself. From the principal."

In addition to not feeling respected, many students also did not feel valued within their school. As one male student said, "I feel as if they don't give – they don't hear a child's voice, they only hear adult voices. You know, they look at everybody like they don't know what they doing, like we still need to be led. Which, we do, but it's not as much as they think." These examples are representative of many students' perceptions of being and/or feeling oppressed, devalued, and disrespected by their educators due to their race and age. Yet, students' perspectives about respect indicate that feeling respected by educators was important to their academic success and behavior in school. As one male student explained, "A lot of people say you have to give respect to get it. If it's a teacher, first of all, [the teacher] automatically got to get respect. This is, *if* she going to give it back to you, you know." In this example, the student explains that many students at the school will not respect and cooperate with their educators unless they feel respected by them. Yet, many students expressed they do *not* feel respected in their school, due to racial stereotyping and ageism, this cultural misunderstanding acts as a barrier to students' academic success by weakening the relationships between students and their

educators, increasing behavior problems, and ultimately, undermining the students' school experiences.

Last, many students perceived the changes their school underwent in the 2011 reform effort neglected the unique needs of the students and the culture of the neighborhood from which they came. As a female student explained, "And it felt like they didn't really think about the students… They just…thought about changing the school. But they just wanted to rush into…a quick change." One way other students expressed the perception that the reform disregarded their needs was by destabilizing the school environment and demanding students respond to this quickly or be punished. However, students argued that this expectation was difficult for students at East Side Academy, as this female student explained, "Like it takes them a while to adjust to things. And we're in the beginning of our fourth month. We're still not really adjusted to it, because we're still stuck in our old habits and old habits die hard for us. It's going to take a while." In this example, the student is explaining that she and her classmates often struggle with adapting to changes in their environment. What these students express is an appreciation for the needs of the students at the school, and a belief that the school reform was implemented in a way that disregarded their unique academic, emotional, and behavioral needs. Another student criticized the reform for not appreciating the students by saying, "'Cause of the neighborhood that it's in, and the principals, just trying to make a big change. Feelin' like Martin Luther King. Basically what it is. But he don't even got that type of development with these kids – that type of relationship I'll say, with people around here." In this way, the student is suggesting that those who made decisions about his school did not have the kind of relationships he considered fundamental to making effective changes that would be benefit students. These quotes are representative of a perception several students expressed that the individuals making decisions

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about their lives and school experiences did not have a competent understanding of their needs and therefore did not create an environment that encouraged their academic success.

To summarize students' views of how a lack of understanding of their culture acted as a barrier to their academic success, these students identified a lack of cultural competency at all levels, including teachers, administrators, the School Board, and Superintendent. The students perceived many educators are unable to relate to them, disregard their experiences, and fail to appreciate what makes them unique as individuals and as a cohort. As such, these professionals struggle to communicate with and engage their students in effective learning. In many cases, students perceived that an appreciation for their experiences of living in poverty is fundamental to an educator's ability understand them. Furthermore, students shared perceptions of not being respected, being judged unfairly, and feeling devalued by school administrators because of their poverty, race, and age. This cultural disrespect also acts to weaken the relationship between students and teachers/administrators. Students also identified the policy decisions that affected their school experiences to be void of an understanding of their needs because the changes created an unstable school environment and the decision makers (the School Board and Superintendent) did not have the appropriate relationship with students to know how best to improve their school. As such, a lack of cultural incompetence is perceived by students to exist at every level of their school's organization and to act as a barrier to their academic success by creating a classroom, school climate, and school environment where they were not understood and their needs could not be met.

4.2   STUDENT IDENTIFIED FACTORS THAT LEAD TO POSITIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

4.2.1   Authoritative Yet Caring and Supportive Educators

Students perceived educators who demonstrated authoritativeness, caring, and supportiveness as the most successful at providing them with positive school experiences. The compound nature of these characteristics should not be overlooked, as students also criticized educators who were only authoritative or who were only caring, describing them as unsuccessful at teaching and managing students. One of the primary ways students made this distinction was by comparing their principals. A number of principals headed the school throughout the year, each with different styles of leadership. In general, the first group of principals was perceived by students as exceedingly caring while the latter principal was described as exceedingly authoritative. Students generally disliked both styles of leadership as the following quotes represent. One male student said, "Well the [principals] we had before, they were too – they're too lenient. Too soft. Tried to – they tried to be friends with everybody. And then, one minute they're friends, next minute, they're trying to discipline you. It doesn't work like that." When discussing the new principal, a female student said, "She's trying to make it seem like we're in prison or something… there's something wrong with her."   Another student commiserated with this student by saying, "If only Barack Obama were here right now. He'll talk some sense into her [i.e. the principal]."   I then asked, "What would you want him to tell her?" and the student responded, "[To] back off!" These critiques of the leadership styles these students were exposed

to highlights their perceptions that either caring or authoritativeness employed in isolation from one another is ineffective.

Instead, students described their ideal educator as someone who embodies authoritativeness *and* caring. For example, a male student described an effective educator by saying, "You gotta be blunt. Teachers, teachers gotta be like, you gotta be [an] authority. But then, it's how they say it, though. You know? If they say it in a way that they want you to learn and will respect you, and they're not like, 'Hey, you want to shut up?!' you know." In this example, the student describes a professional who is authoritative but also respectful and caring towards the students, enabling students to respond to his or her leadership. Another student talked about her most beloved teacher, as she said, "I have this one teacher. I love him to death. He's funny, educated, and teaches well. And he actually cares." While the student described this teacher as caring, she also described him as authoritative, "He doesn't let any drama in his classroom. He doesn't play about that." These students provide examples of how they perceive effective educators to be in control of their classrooms by being authoritative, while also able to engage with students because they convey care and respect. These perceptions also indicate students perceive educators with authoritative *and* caring capacities as catalysts for students' positive school experiences because they are engaging and able to manage student behavior in the classroom.

How students described caring educators was sometimes synonymous with authoritativeness. In other words, students recognized that their educators cared because they were authoritative, which was distinct from being punitive or harsh. For example, one female student explained, "They care, you can tell, like, they go out their way to help you and make sure you doing what you got to do". By ensuring that students were on task, (i.e. making sure they

were doing what they were supposed to be doing) this educator's actions conveyed to students that he or she cared about them. In another example, a female student explained how her teacher's authoritative and caring attitude led her to learn more in class, saying, "Like, he's teaching us stuff like, we never knew. In his class, you'll learn something, and he'll make sure that you understand it." These examples suggest students perceive caring educators as in-control and directive – professionals who demand and ensure success – and that these behaviors are indicative of a positive regard for students and a dedication to their success. Therefore, students perceive having the ability to command student learning through an attitude of authority and determination ultimately conveyed a sense of support and caring to the students.

The educators students perceived as authoritative and caring, they also described as supportive. In almost all cases, educators identified by students as effective provided more help and support than others did. Recalling a portion of a quote used earlier, a female student said, "They care, you can tell, like, they go out their way to help you". Another student who had described her teacher earlier also said, "And he'll help us, even though like, hard times outside the school. Like, someone to talk to." In these examples, the students perceive their educators as supportive because they provide additional academic support, as well as non-academic support. In another example, a female student described a school professional she regarded highly by explaining the support this educator provided during a student protest. As she said, "'Cause, one day, we had a protest, and we was all in the hallway, not going to class, and she told us like, what to do, what to say." When asked what the protest was about, the student explained, "Um, like for our credits and how we're not getting enough." She said the teacher was supportive of the protest "because, like, she gives us her opinions about, like, the school, and she's real about it, she doesn't lie to us. She says that she'll never lie about anything to us…

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[She says] that she wants to teach here, and wants to educate us." From her perspective, her educator demonstrates she is dedicated to and supportive of her students in all areas of their lives and will advocate for them and their academic success. All of these examples speak to the final perception students convey about effective educators, that these authoritative and caring professionals also demonstrate a supportive quality that ensures their success, both academically and outside of school, beyond the normative scope of the school professional's responsibilities.

In sum, students perceive their ideal educator as a professional who is authoritative and caring, and provides an extraordinary amount of support to students regarding both academic and non-academic issues. The characteristics of authoritativeness and caring were perceived by some students to complement one another in two distinct ways. First, authoritativeness enabled educators to engage students and demand their attention, while their caring encouraged students to comply with their rules and leadership. Second, authoritativeness was sometimes described as indicative of caring because educators who demonstrated directive and managerial behaviors towards students were perceived as dedicated and caring. As such, students also perceived these skills to be interdependent and ineffective in isolation from one another. Effective educators who were described as caring and authoritative were also described as being more supportive of students' overall success than other school personnel. Students explained that the professionals who embodied these three skills were more likely to lead students toward positive school experiences, as they maintain behavioral control in their classrooms, facilitate learning, and provide optimal support for students' success.

4.2.2 Structured Small Group Collaboration

Another factor students identified that led to positive academic experiences was small class sizes and structured collaborative learning. In some cases, students were taught in small classes as a result of the school's single-sex policy. Students described liking a small number of students in class (regardless of gender) because this was helpful to their learning. According to one female student, "And. um, like, the smaller the group is the more work we can get done." Another female student explained further, "So, I just like how small the classes are. 'Cause I feel the smaller they are, the more work you could get done." When asked how many students constituted big and small classes, this female student's response indicate "small" to be, "from 5 to 10 girls in the classroom… But my first block had like 15. My first [block], the algebra class, is the only big one." Therefore, students perceive that classes with fewer than 10 students were the most effective at teaching students, and that there is a relationship between the number of students in a class and the amount of information students are able to learn.

In addition to class size, students suggested the structure and composition of their classes to be significant to their learning. In most interviews that discussed class structure, students advocated for more structure than their teachers had been employing. For example one male student recommended, "For me, I'd reshape some of these classes. Reshape 'em, like, I would start using these tables, instead of these desks." The interviewer then asked him, "So you can have better-" and the student enthusiastically interrupted, "group work!" In this example, the student is recommending a physical restructuring of student seating that would increase group collaboration, with group work being a more effective learning structure for him and his fellow students. The same student also recommended additional classroom support as a way to increase

class structure and aid in students' learning. In his words, "I'd put, uh, two teachers in one class. Maybe one actual teacher and one, like, to help." When the interviewer asked, "What would be good about having two teachers?" the student replied, "Uh, better learning. Like, you got the actual teacher, and you got the other one going around helping." This young man not only describes the importance of additional classroom structure and support, but also delineates how these additional educators would supplement teachers' lessons and aid in student learning (i.e. going around helping while the teacher is giving their lessons). Furthermore, the class structure this student describes suggests the need for additional students' attention from educators.

Other students identified classroom structure as beneficial to their academic success by describing effective educators and the methods they used to incorporate group work and structured learning environments into their classrooms. For example, one student explained she was learning and performing well in one particular class because the class was collaborative. When describing one of her favorite classes, the interviewer asked her, "How are students doing in this class, compared to maybe other math classes?" the student replied, "Um, pretty good, because we do our work together. And not independent. Sometimes we do it independent, and then we check our work and go over it [together]." This student suggests that she is doing better in a class because of structured collaboration and that other students are doing better as well. In addition, another student provided an example of how classroom structure could be used to increase discipline within the classroom. She explained, "Like my second period, the, there's a bigger group closer to the door, and then there's a smaller group away from the door. And like, we just kind of switch sometimes… like sometimes the left side talks more and the other side does the work, or the other side talks more and the left side does their work." In this example, the student describes a classroom where the students are divided into sub-groups and given

individual attention with intermittent breaks. While the teacher's use of these breaks could be perceived as neglectful, the student assured us, "Like we learn, like we're ahead of her other class." In this example, the students are described as talking when they are on a break, indicating they are not talking when they are working. As constant talking was described as a behavior problem and barrier to academic success, the perception that this barrier is mitigated by a small-group class structure suggests that this model may lead students to more positive school experiences. In addition, the division of students into smaller groups also supports notions that the size of a class, or at least the size of the learning group, is a significant contributor to students' learning.

Overall, the perception that small, structured, collaborative classrooms and instruction were beneficial to students' learning and increased positive school experiences was shared by several students. These perceptions were described in varied ways, yet shared a common theme of encouraging students to work together, reducing the size of the classroom or learning group, and enabling additional student and teacher interaction. Furthermore, students perceived that smaller classes were more beneficial to student learning independent of structure, and one student described a small class as having ten or fewer students. In sum, students perceived that smaller, structured, and collaborative classrooms provided them an academic benefit and should be used more at East Side Academy.

4.2.3   Extracurricular and Recreational Activities

When students were asked to describe their favorite aspect of school, the most common response was extracurricular activities. Students described enjoying and benefitting from a variety of

school-based extracurricular activities including the arts, academic support, college support, and recreational activities. One male student said, "I'd probably have to say the activities. The activities, you know, like, sports. I'm saying, afterschool programs, you know. Like a support. They do got a lot of support. Um, tutoring, basically. Or like, get[ting] you ready for your graduation project." Similarly, a female student answered, "I like some of the people they brought in that are helping us with college, and getting ready for the next step." Another female student answered the same question saying, "Um, that we get more opportunities. Like, we didn't – like, last year, we didn't have the health careers, the uh, pottery, and other classes." These students, and many others, suggest both academic and non-academic opportunities were available to them in the school and they perceived these programs and activities to be assets to East Side Academy because they improved their school experiences better.

Furthermore, many students discussed why these activities and opportunities were so beneficial. As one female student explained, "I would say [the name of an afterschool program] because it helps me with my homework, I do my talents here, we can – we can learn more, and it helps us do stuff that we don't do in school." As such, this student perceives her involvement with extracurricular programming encouraged her success in school and broadened the scope of her knowledge and abilities. The student continued, "I do music here. We don't do photo – photographing in school, we do it here. We don't make movies in school, we do it here." By these statements, the student suggests extracurricular engagement provides her with learning opportunities that her school cannot or is not providing. Another student described that he enjoyed an academic afterschool program because he learned "that I can do something if I put my mind to it." In this example, the student perceives that his participation in an extracurricular activity has empowered him and enabled him to realize the power of his own abilities. Another

student contended that a creative arts afterschool program had a direct influence on students' likelihood of graduating. As she said, "[The afterschool program] has the highest rate of kids that graduate. Like, without it, we would be like, down bad, like, wouldn't nobody be graduating. We'd have like, only like, 5 people graduating from this school." These examples represent a common perception that extracurricular activities provided students a wide range of benefits and improved their academics. Interestingly, every student who described the benefits of extracurricular activities emphasized the academic and psychological benefits of these opportunities as well, never describing the activities as frivolous or important because they were simply enjoyable. Rather, students believed that extracurricular activities were beneficial because they complemented academics, and supplemented the school's resources.

In sum, the majority of students suggest extracurricular activities to be the best quality of East Side Academy and that these programs lead students to have positive school experiences. They perceived their experience with these programs and activities to provide them with multiple advantaged including, support, post-secondary transitional guidance, enhanced opportunities, expanded abilities, empowerment, and improved their academics. As such, students saw extracurricular activities as central to healthy development and their overall success.

4.3 TEACHER IDENTIFIED BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

4.3.1 Poor Administrative Support

Every teacher who participated in this study identified poor performance on the part of the school administration as the largest barrier to students' academic success. In fact, the topic of the school administration was one of paramount importance to teachers, as each discussed the administration at great length, these issues were usually brought up voluntarily, and administrative problems became the dominant focus of several teacher interviews. Teachers' critique of the administration, however, was complex and changed, as the administration was reorganized nearly four months into the school year. Therefore, teachers' perspectives regarding the school administration and how they believed administrative inadequacies affected students' performance are described here in chronological order.

In the beginning of the school year, teachers perceived their administration as unprepared and dysfunctional. Though some of the ways they described this lack of administrative readiness did not always influence student achievement, the majority of the perceived administrative shortcomings was seen to undermine students' success. For example, one teacher explained, "I wish the school would have been more organized at the beginning, 'cause it sort of reflects on how we're able to teach, how we're able to do our job." When the teacher was asked to elaborate on his observations of the lack of organization, he replied, "Umm, let's see. No student lists, no schedules, no grade book. Changing start time. Changing classes. Students not having credits that they need – stuff like that." In this example, the teacher explains that administrative

planning errors led him to be less successful at teaching his students because he lacked the necessary tools to conduct his classes effectively.

Other teachers provided us with specific examples of their experiences with administrative disorganization, and how these acted to impair their students' learning. In one example, a teacher described, "I had an 8th grader [in my class] and I didn't know who he was! I didn't have a roster, you know, we had no schedules. I did not even know he was an 8th grader. He started attending my 9th grade English class! So when he was finally placed properly, he was already behind the game and missed out." This teacher followed her remarks by adding, "So that happened in more than one instance. I'm sure it was happening all over the school." In another example, a different teacher described having students with special needs incorrectly placed in her class due to an administrative error. As she said, "[At the beginning of the year] I realized that a lot of my kids were special-ed kids. I am not a special-ed teacher. I do not have a special-ed certification. I had no support in my classroom. And it became an issue. Because they needed more support!" This teacher proceeded to tell the interviewer that she had been in contact with the school and district administration repeatedly about this discrepancy, and that it had not been attended to until three months into the school year.

In addition, teachers shared countless other examples of students' academics being compromised due to administrative errors and disorganization. To summarize a few of these examples, teachers explained students were housed in the auditorium for a week in lieu of classrooms, some students lost credit due to scheduling mistakes, some students were forced to be homeschooled in order to graduate on time, and the school building became a "free-for-all." In short, teachers described the most detrimental shortcoming of the administration to be its

failure to provide students and teachers the necessary tools and information to function successfully in their roles. As such, they perceived their ability to teach was impaired, students' academic needs were neglected, learning opportunities were delayed, and a climate of school chaos consumed the building. Most importantly, however, teachers explained that the presence of these administrative errors were particularly damaging to the students at this school because it exacerbated the severity of existing problems. As one teacher explained, "I mean, we're already dealing with the poverty. It's not even the invisible elephant in the room. It's in the room. We're already battling that. We're already battling internalized oppression. You know, we're already battling all these issues. So, when you introduce all these new issues that are *logistical*, but that affect the real learning environment by destabilizing classrooms and prohibiting teachers from establishing relationships with kids? Forget about it! Forget about it." In sum, teachers identified numerous examples of how administrative problems at the beginning of the school year impaired students' learning, and that these problems acted to magnify the influence of poverty and oppression on their schooling experiences.

Furthermore, some teachers believed the administrative chaos that occurred in the beginning of the year had an extended negative influence on students' performance throughout the year and continued to undermine students' academic success regardless of efforts to address it. As one teacher exclaimed, "And starting off the year like that? The first couple of weeks when the students don't have class and they're sitting in the auditorium, that's just, I mean, you're going to have a bad first year." Similarly, a teacher who was interviewed later in the school year confirmed this prediction, stating, "The problems that we face to this very day can be directly traced to [what] the first six, eight weeks of the school year was like. The students'

psyche has been extremely distorted, because of the problems that we started the year with." By this statement, the teacher conveys his perspective that the harm many students sustained due to administrative inadequacies at the start of the school year continued to reverberate on students' performance several months thereafter. As another teacher envisioned the remainder of the school year, she proposed, "I think that by the end of the school year, it's going to be rough for them, but it's going to get better. You know, I always was told that whenever you come in, you lay the law down. [You] couldn't come in January, February, try[ing] to change something. Because they're so used to things being so lax." In this example, this teacher suggests that future administrative improvements would be less effective than if they had been in place at the start of the school year because they are following a period of insufficiency. As such, this teacher conveys that administrative shortcomings at the beginning of the year were highly determinative of students' success throughout the year, and thus a stronger emphasis should have been placed on this critical and formative time. Therefore, not only did teachers perceive poor administrative planning impeded the performance of students, but that these shortcomings were particularly detrimental because they occurred at the beginning of the year, and thus continued to plague students' success throughout the year. As such, all the teachers who participated in this study argued that one of the reasons their students struggled in school was because the school administration had not been adequately prepared for the school year, fundamentally disrupting the course of the entire year and jeopardizing students' long-term academic success.

Despite their many critiques of the initial administration, teachers provided mixed reviews regarding the displacement of the original principals and the factors that precipitated the administration's poor performance. Some teachers opposed the removal of the principals simply

because they perceived this action increased disruptions in the school. As one teacher explained, many teachers and students were not prepared for the sudden shift in leadership, "They fired our principals [snaps fingers]. And without really warning us. It was just, oh here one day gone the next. 'Administrative leave.' Which was horrible! Because, not only did that just really take away from the morale, it caused so much more upheaval." This perspective was shared by others who emphasized further the negative impact this sudden transition had on students. In other cases, some teachers defended the administration outright. As one teacher stated, "I think there are things that were out of their control. They didn't have a relationship with the students. They're not going to do anything for you if you don't have that. Um, that takes time. Time you may not have, at the beginning."

Other teachers defended the administration by citing the many challenges they faced due to the implementation of the 2011 reform. For example, a teacher said, "I think they were really trying to make do with the resources that we have here. And um, I definitely give them the credit for that. But uh, you know, as a private or public school system, I've never seen [changes] this drastic." Similarly, another teacher defended them, saying "I believe, I really believe it [the school] needed those same principals, who felt so passionately about [the changes], from the door, to stay on. And they needed at *least* a year. At least, if not five." In other ways, teachers supported the administration by explaining that the reform effort they were responsible for carrying out was unrealistic for the school. As one teacher explained, "They built this school totally ignoring a massive variable. Which is that, we take everybody who comes here. And we should! But we can't model ourselves off of selective schools. The people who planned the school, they went to all these charter schools. And [at those schools] they can kick you out if

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you're not going to make it. You can't compare us." By this statement, the teacher is explaining that the administration functioned poorly because they were being asked to carryout administrative duties that were not appropriate for the students at the school. As such, this teacher suggests that the school administration was bound to fail regardless of leadership and refers to a critical miscalculation in school reform. As such, it was evident that some, but not all, teachers, were very supportive of the original administration regardless of their past inadequacies, which they disliked but for which they did not necessarily hold them accountable.

However, other teachers were less sympathetic towards the administration. One male teacher in particular did not agree that the administration's poor performance could be attributed to the pressure of the reform effort. As he told us, "You know, the issues at [East Side Academy] did not stem from the single-gender [reconfiguration], and they did not stem from the merging of the schools. They simply did not. Anybody who would tell you that, I think has a real fundamental misunderstanding of what went wrong here. The school was simply not prepared to operate in any capacity, let alone a capacity that was adjusted from years prior." Another unsupportive teacher, however, did cite the reform as the cause of the administrative problems but held the administration responsible for choosing to adopt the changes, explaining, "The administration wrote a check that they couldn't cash. You going to make a policy that you can't enforce? Good luck with that in *this* community. Good luck! You going to make a rule that you can't enforce? How about make more rules that you can't enforce, and then keep making them. We can't enforce these rules!" In this example, the teacher perceives the administration demonstrated shortsightedness by implementing policies without a sufficient ability to carry them out. Furthermore, the teacher believes that this shortsightedness was

particularly ineffective because of particularities about the community the school serves. On the other hand, a few of the teachers were simply looking forward to the new principal because they asserted that *anything* would have been an improvement from the original administration. In sum, while a handful of educators were supportive of the original administration, this view was not shared by all. Counter views also varied, as some did not perceive the reform to be significant, while others did and blamed the administration for wrongfully investing in it, and others, still, were optimistic about administrative change in general. As such, several teachers believed removing the principals would be a healthy solution, while others considered it unfair, and some thought it would be harmful in its own right. Regardless of what teachers believed, however, the principals were promptly removed, a new principal was instated, and the administration underwent a total reconfiguration.

Under the new school leadership, however, many teachers continued to be dissatisfied and concerned for their students' academics. Although teachers were overall less vocal about the new administration compared to their discussions of the original one, when the new principal and administration were brought up, it was seldom positive. One teacher's statement captures this: "I have professional critiques of [the principal]. I think she's a brilliant woman. She's great with the kids. I'm talking, great. She can walk into a room and the kids are just magnetized by her. She's a magnetic person. But she reorganized the school in a way that was highly regressive! I'm talking, 1950's stuff." As such, many teachers favored the principal as a professional, but disliked the organizational and administrative course she took. To elaborate, several teachers described the new administration's issuing of limitations on teacher collaboration and removed their creative allowance in the classroom. As one teacher explained,

"No more meeting with the other teachers, to talk to parents, to create, you know, structured plans, to identify the really at-risk and needy kids, who needed special supports. I mean, we did all that together. *That ended*. They pulled the plug on that. They pulled the plug on being able to um, call a parent, you know, just pick up the phone – we were not allowed to do that anymore. We weren't allowed to invite them into our classrooms anymore."

Similarly, a teacher described how the new administration placed limitations on his ability to practice discipline in the classroom. As he described, "I have rules that I can enforce in my classroom. And I enforce them. Sometimes it puts me at odds with the administration. But I am not going to lose control of my class. Because they're going to say, 'well, you can't do that, you're depriving a' – no, no, no. Hold up. They're depriving the other students. And I'll do everything I can for that student. With the exception of allowing them to destroy the class for everybody else." Several teachers perceived that creativity, flexibility, and communication were some of the most successful tools for facilitating student engagement and classroom learning. Thus, the prohibition on these by the new administration was perceived to be harmful to the academic success of students. As such, many teachers explained, despite their optimism, the new administration was proving to be as problematic as the previous administration, though the barriers they established to success were different.

Furthermore, some teachers perceived that the new administration created a hostile climate for them, impairing their ability to teach. Many teachers described feeling blamed for the previous administration's inadequacies. In almost all cases, when a teacher described a hostile school climate, they described feeling at odds with the administration, and feeling as though their jobs were not secure. As one explained, "I believe [the principal] was more of a

headhunter. A headhunter who wanted to start getting these teachers out. And it worked. She put several [teachers] on improvement plans – after all that insanity that I explained to you – that I explained in the months before he came in. Can you imagine?" Another teacher, who had recently been furloughed by the district, told us, "Firing the teachers, re-hiring a bunch of new teachers, it's not working. Nobody's paying attention. The teachers did not create this. Flat out. The teachers did not create this. Yet we are the ones who are under the most scrutiny. You know. I mean, it takes the focus off of the institution and puts it on individuals. As opposed to looking at an institution that doesn't function healthfully." By this statement, the teacher indicated that he perceives the administration was unfairly punishing teachers for a problem he perceives was primarily administrative in nature.

Another teacher described his perspective that the School Board discriminated against senior educators. As he said, "The idea that any profession would say to somebody, 'your experience makes you *less* of a desirable candidate' is really a hideous climate to work in. I mean, they punish you because of these working conditions. It's a really hostile place to teach, you know?" In a final example, a teacher who had resigned from the school shared that one of the primary reasons she left her job was because of hostility she felt from the new principal. As she explained, "I couldn't hack it anymore, I couldn't hack any of it. And no, I was not on an improvement plan, my classroom was beautiful. I had all my stuff straight. I mean, I don't mess around with any of that, and I knew my kids and my kids' people, and I knew everything, and that principal came in and just like, treated me like I was a piece of dirt." She proceeded to describe experiences of being mocked by the principal, unfairly judged, required to comply with physically impossible policies with little administrative support, and a variety of other disturbing

experiences her co-workers encountered. I then asked her, "If there had been a principal who you got along with, who you felt believed in you, do you think that you would have left?" She promptly responded, "Probably not." In addition to this teacher, several teachers ended the school year describing the climate of the school as hostile and unworkable. While some described greater resiliency against these challenges than others, consensus emerged among many teachers that the new administration was not only unsupportive, but appeared to hinder and obstruct teachers from performing their jobs. As a teacher's role is to educate students, this suggests many teachers perceived the administration's lack of support to be a negative influence on students' academic success.

In sum, every teacher participant described a range of administrative problems that functioned as a barrier to student academic success. In all cases, these administrative problems were described within the context of students' best interests, and every teacher expressed that administrative shortcomings were harmful to students. In the beginning of the school year, teachers described the original administration as unorganized and unprepared. This lack of professional readiness was criticized by teachers, who argued that administrative inadequacies compromised their abilities, neglected the academic needs of students, delayed their learning, and evoked a chaotic school climate. Furthermore, some teachers perceived that administrative errors occurred during a highly formative period, thus prolonging the negative effect of these errors. Despite this consensus, teachers disagreed about the cause of the administrative disorganization at the beginning of the year. When the new administration began, however, most perspectives remained negative, though for different reasons. Teachers explained they felt blamed and unfairly scrutinized by the new administration for the many challenges caused at the

start of the school year. Teachers described having their creative license curtailed, teacher collaboration dismantled, and communication with parents strained. Eventually, other teachers perceived the administration had created a volatile and hostile school environment for them, where they feared for their jobs, were not respected, and were provided little administrative support. With this added pressure, one teacher told us she resigned, another explained he had been furloughed, and all teachers who discussed this negative climate perceived it detracted from their ability to teach effectively. As such, the perspectives of teachers regarding the administration were dynamic and complex. However, a pattern of dissatisfaction is evident. Teachers were opposed to an administration they perceived did not support learning. Not all elements of either administration were harmful, yet teachers cite a variety of ways in which they perceived both administrations to restrict the abilities of students and create additional barriers to their success in school.

4.3.2 Inconsistencies in School

Teachers also identified inconsistencies in school to be a barrier to students' academic success. These inconsistencies were unanimously described as the result of poor administrative support and administrative transitions, thus should be considered in combination with the previous section. However, the influence of inconsistencies on student achievement was described by teachers as significant, therefore warranting independent analysis. To begin, teachers described the school year as one plagued by innumerable changes and disruptions. Some of the inconsistencies the school experienced were substantiated by quotes from the previous section, describing the organizational disarray that consumed the first months of the school, the changing

school leadership, and the reconfiguration of students and teacher policies midway through the year. To contextualize teachers' perceptions and place them in chronological order of school inconsistencies, one teacher provided an excellent summative statement of many of the changes the students had experienced:

> We had all these different transitions going on. The transitioning principals, borrowed from other schools… it was chaos, you know? We changed schedules, we finally did get the schedules – well not all the schedules were good with credits, so there was still that going on. And we're, we're talking, oh, a good six weeks into the school year now, and it's starting to really matter that we get some control. But before that, actually, they had a busing issue. So they changed the time that the darn school day started! Then the third change was when they brought the boys and girls back together after losing the [gender separation] case. This brings us up to Thanksgiving. And we have a break. Then we have Winter Break. We go away. We don't see these kids again until January. Do you know we've just re-started the school year? It's like – it's January now! Insane! And we have tests!!

Within the context of these multiple changes, teachers described the school year as consumed by instability. As a teacher confirms, "I don't think, since the school year's been started, even before [removing] the single-gender [classes], nothing here has really been, um, consistent. But I think that it's just shame – it's just a shame."

In addition to noting logistical changes, other teachers citied inconsistencies in promises made by the administration to students prior to the start of the school year. One teacher described these expectations, saying, "I know all the students were promised an iPad if they came here. They were promised a choice of classes. Small classes. Internships. SAT prep. All kinds of stuff. [Teachers] were promised small classes, get to teach what you want, no cell phones to deal with, you won't have to take over morning meeting, advisor will be there to help kids that are having trouble. Lots." He followed his remark in a suggestion to the

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administration: "Let us keep our promises. To kids. To parents. Too much didn't happen this year." While transition, change, and broken promises are not inherently detrimental to student success, the teachers believed these forces were undoubtedly harmful to students' success in multiple ways.

First, some teachers believed that school inconsistencies were detrimental to students' psychological and emotional wellbeing. As one discussed, "I always think about what it does to the students. You know, we have a lot of students here who have IEPs [special needs]. So the constant changes have a lot of impact on them emotionally and mentally." Another teacher explained she observed her students becoming "depressed, angry, and violent" because of the unstable school environment. Another teacher proposed that the school closures alone were detrimental to some students. As she said, "I've noticed from interviewing so many of the kids, that, um, a lot of times they've dropped out of school because they shut their school down and were putting them here. And they were being tortured, you know, all the way to school and all the way back." In these ways, teachers believe their multiple school changes were emotionally and psychologically harmful to students, and were a detriment to their overall health and ability to succeed in school.

Second, teachers described the school changes as particularly detrimental to students living in poverty. As one teacher said, "I can only imagine, like, as a student, you know, growing up in the inner city, you know, a lot who don't have a father around, and they constantly see people in and out of their lives, and they see people in and out of their lives in school. It's just – I, I just think it's draining on them more than anything." Another teacher discussed the importance of consistency for low-income children, and how the school changes were in direct

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violation of best practices for the students at the school, "Successful urban teaching is dependent on rituals, routines, relationships. All these transitions, all the instability, introducing new staff, introducing new students, introducing all these things, changing them constantly, no schedules, no discipline, no relationships, it – I mean, it absolutely undermined any possibility for reclaiming this school year. You know, and reclaiming this school as a place of, you know, real learning." In these ways, teachers perceived inconsistencies to be an impediment to students' success because their students are particularly vulnerable to changes in their environment. As such, in order for these their students to succeed and reach their full potential, consistency in the school environment must be established. Unfortunately, little stability was ever present in the school and the students suffered academically and emotionally as a result.

Third, many teachers believed school inconsistencies were detrimental to learning because they compromised relationship-building between teachers and students. A number of teachers proceeded to share their experiences building relationships and rapport with a group of students, only to have them removed from their classrooms. For at least one teacher, this process happened repeatedly, and he described losing these relationships as painful, unethical, and counter-productive. Teachers also talked about the relational barriers caused by school inconsistency in terms that were more general. For example, one explained, "Having this teacher all year, and then switching to this teacher. And having them learn to adapt to a different style of learning, to a different approach to education. And, um, you know, for some of them, it's almost like a spit in the face to what they were doing before." In this example, the teacher is describing a lack of respect for students because they are constantly required to develop new relationships with teachers. In another example, a teacher empathizes with the relational challenges her

students are facing, saying "So if you've had a strong relationship with one of your teachers, or the counselor, *for years*, and now you really need them and they're just not there at this point, like it, it sucks. I wouldn't want to go to school either." In this example, the teacher implies that many students become disengaged from school because their meaningful relationships with teachers have been destroyed by inconsistencies. The teacher frames this psychological process as a rational and understandable reaction to an emotionally insensitive school policy. These examples are representative of many teachers' beliefs that relationships are essential to academic success and that school inconsistencies can weaken and dismantle these critical connections.

Finally, teachers explained that school inconsistencies were detrimental to students' success because they compromised the enforcement of discipline and rendered teachers unable to maintain order in their classrooms. Much like students described, teachers also agreed that school discipline polices changed frequently and were irregularly enforced. However, teachers explained that these inconsistencies functioned to undermine the effectiveness of discipline overall. This perspective was demonstrated by teachers' assertions that they were operating in a school with *practically* no rules. As one teacher explained, "For all intents and purposes, we don't have detention." Similarly, another teacher said, "We essentially have no code of conduct, that's printed, everybody knows, et cetera." As another teacher explained, inconsistencies in school-wide discipline had a fundamental influence on teachers' ability control their classrooms and perform their responsibilities, "The school doesn't set the expectations. And then, the teachers operate within that system. Right. And sometimes, you know, they can get eaten alive, right. It's like a football game. If there's no rules in the game, and you're coaching against another coach? I mean, you better be able to win in an environment where there's no rules, you

know?" By this analogy, the teacher is explaining that the school's inconsistent discipline system functioned to create an environment where rules were useless and/or nonexistent, robbing teachers of their tools to maintain order and teach effectively. As such, he asserts that teachers at this school were required to maintain classroom order in an environment where order was not supported. He also suggests that many teachers have not been able to accomplish such a feat. Therefore, students' academics suffered because inconsistencies in discipline caused teachers to become less effective, as they were void of the mechanism to manage student behavior and transfer knowledge accordingly.

In sum, teachers perceived that school-wide inconsistencies were abundant throughout and functioned to undermine the academic success of students in a number of ways. First, these multiple changes in school setting were believed to be harmful to the mental and emotional health of students. Second, the unstable school environment was perceived to be particularly demanding and distracting to low-income students. Third, these multiple transitions were thought to compromise the positive relationships between students and teachers. Fourth, inconsistencies made discipline enforcement impossible for teachers, reducing their effectiveness in the classroom. As such, the school instability caused by changes in policies, administration, and schedules were perceived to contribute to students' academic struggles.

4.3.3   Negative Out-Of-School Influences and Experiences

The final barrier to student academic success that teachers identified was negative influences and experiences outside of school. In some interviews teachers conveyed keen awareness that their students were struggling in school because of issues that developed at home and in the

community. However, the word "poverty" was employed only once to describe these influences, and minimal association to income was made by any teacher participant to explain students' struggles. Instead, teachers described *symptoms* associated with poverty as the negative external influences affecting students, impeding their academic performance. As such, it can only be inferred that teachers perceived poverty as an impediment to education. More accurately, what they identified were a variety of "negative external forces." For example, one teacher characterized the students at the school by referring to them as "students that are struggling the most, have the most behavior problems, come from the most destabilized families, the most dysfunctional backgrounds, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera." This teacher followed his remarks by adding that these external factors inherently create a variety of problems for students in school, "You're not going to turn this school into [the highest performing school in the district]. It's not going happen. So, we're always going to have challenges, we're always going to have problems." By these statements, this teacher is asserting that the students at this school experience more hardship and negative external influences than any other student body in the district, and that these factors significantly deplete students' ability to perform in school. As such, he believes these negative external influences create challenges that are disproportionately experienced at this school in particular. In several other interviews, students were described as "at-risk." For example one teacher exclaimed, "Come on, let's get real, we're working with at-risk, high-needs kids! [Who live] in a very strange, you know, almost incestuous neighborhood." Others were more subtle in how they described the negative external forces affecting students' academics. For example, one teacher said, "Our students come with a little bit of baggage, so at times it's a little bit tougher to get the most out of them." In all cases, regardless of how negative

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external factors and experiences were defined, they were perceived to cause students additional academic struggle and were seldom discussed outside the context of harming students' success.

Some teachers proposed that student achievement was compromised because negative external forces were detrimental to students' psychological wellbeing. One teacher asserted, "I don't know about psychology, but I'll tell you this, our kids have stress disorders. Period. Whether it's post-traumatic stress, whatever it is, they have stress disorders. And, we were talking about trauma. And like, twenty kids – seniors, started talking about things they've seen and been through. I felt like a mule kicked me right in my sternum." In this example, the teacher declared his belief that many students at the school have experienced traumatic events outside of school and are suffering psychologically as a result. While a number of teachers also described their students as traumatized, some added they did not believe the school was providing these students with appropriate emotional and psychological support. As one teacher contended, "I mean, our kids get shot. Our kids get raped. Our kids are homeless. Our kids are victims of abuse. I mean, I had a student today get punched in the face outside my door by her mother. And we got one social worker. That's pretty sickening to me." Furthermore, some teachers did not perceive the resources in the school were helpful, as represented by another teacher's remarks, "They have seen so much and the counselors that serve these kids are desensitized to the things that these kids see, and they don't treat it with appropriate concern." On several occasions, teachers described students having behavioral episodes in class, which they identified as indicative of psychological unrest. Yet, in a handful of these examples, teachers explained the only repercussion for the incident was to suspend the student from school. In one example in particular, a teacher shared that a principals had pressured her to pursue legal

penalties against a student who experienced a psychological "melt down" in class and destroyed a computer. The teacher refused because both the student's parents were recently deceased, his guardian was in the hospital, and she believed he was suffering emotionally. Regardless of the extenuating circumstances, the student was suspended from school for a week, provided no school-based emotional support resources upon his return, and the teacher was reprimanded for not pressing charges. Overall, many teachers perceived their students experienced psychological trauma and distress due to a variety negative experiences and influences outside of school. However, some teachers were critical of the school's behavioral health approach, perceiving their tactics and supportive mechanisms were ineffective and did little to support students' wellbeing in school. As such, teachers perceived that their students' psychological impairments made them less likely to succeed in school, as they were often punished for displaying their symptoms or their needs were neglected altogether.

Finally, teachers described a range of other avenues in which negative community and home influences undermined students' academic success. Although these perspectives were varied and difficult to categorize, they function to substantiate further teachers' beliefs that many students had out-of-school experiences that compromised their academic progress. For example, one teacher suggested that many students struggle with discipline because they reside in unstructured homes. As she explained, "A lot of kids probably just got parents that, well, they probably don't have parents at home, they're not living with mom, or they're not living with dad, they're living with aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, aunts, whatever, you know, and they don't have that, that structure and stuff at home. So they might be used to running over mom and dad at home, but whenever they come to school, you know, their old tricks aren't working no more."

This teacher is explaining that some students are more likely to get in trouble at school because they are not provided structure and discipline outside of school. In another example, a male teacher described that several of his students struggle with motivation. When asked to elaborate on why he thought that was, he explained, "For one, they haven't seen it. I'm finding that you have to *see* success yourself. There's not as much [success here] as there should be. But at the family level, in the neighborhood, when you're surrounded by [success], you feel like this is just the way life is." As such, this teacher suggests students at the school are likely to be academically unmotivated and therefore disadvantaged because they have little exposure to success in their homes and community. Another teacher explained the presence of drugs in the neighborhood was harmful to students, saying, "Weed has become so popularized that it's really hurting this community. I mean, it's so normalized. I mean, marijuana really hurts our kids. It really hurts them. It's not crack, it's not heroin, it's not ecstasy like in the suburbs, it's not acid. It's marijuana. But it really hurts them. I think people should have a right to do what they want, but, I mean, they might as well be showing up to school drunk. They're totally out of it! We got a huge percentage of *high* kids. I can't prove it. Other than, just the way they act." These statements and others help explore teachers' perspectives of how students' achievement is compromised by multiple negative influences they face when not in school. In these examples, teachers perceive students as less able to comply with discipline, maintain achievement motivation, avoid substance use, and establish other critical academic necessities because all the additional challenges they faced within in the community.

In sum, teachers believe students' academics were threatened by a variety of negative factors and experiences outside of school. These forces were described in number of ways,

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including trauma exposure, abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional), homelessness, death and illness, exposure to violence, and substance use, among others. These external forces were perceived to create a number of academic problems for students, including behavior problems and mental illness. Although teachers did not explicitly identify "poverty" and "oppression" as the causal agents for these negative influences, each factor they describe is associated. Furthermore, some teachers believed the adverse effects of students' negative experiences outside of school are often neglected and unresolved in school because emotional and psychological resources are inadequate and underutilized. As such, teachers suggest their students faced significantly more challenges outside of school than other students, that these external forces weigh heavily on their academic success, and deprive them of the ability to maximize their academic potential.

4.4 TEACHER IDENTIFIED FACTORS THAT LEAD TO POSITIVE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

4.4.1 Professional Relationship-Building and Interpersonal Skills

In light of the many barriers teachers perceived to limit students' success, they also believed that relationship-building and interpersonal skills had the ability to counter these forces and lead students to have positive school experiences. The importance of relationship and communication skills was evidenced by teachers' reflection on both their own experiences and their observations of other teachers. As one teacher described, creating meaningful relationships was not always

easy but was nevertheless essential, "If you're not a teacher who's able to really, really assert yourself and build incredible relationships in spite of all odds, if you're not one of those teachers, I mean, you are swimming upstream the whole year. Well, you already are. So, yeah, so just swim with a lead vest on then." This teacher conveys relationships serve as a key mechanism for how teachers can create successful learning experiences for their students. He also asserts that education professionals must not only have adequate relationship-building skills, but must demonstrate profound communication skills, because a variety of challenges are present within the school that strain the relationship-building process.

Another teacher discussed the importance of relationships by emphasizing consistent communication with his students. As he explained, "It's really important to keep in contact. Making it personal is really important. Keeping in contact. Get as much contact information as you can. That's something that's important with our students. Just text, call, ensure that you reach out to them each and every day and say, 'Hey, what are you doing?' This way, you're not harassing them, but they say [to themselves], 'Look, you know, this person is actually taking an interest in me, is checking up on me.'" This teacher creates meaningful relationships with students, and suggests students themselves value these because it allows them to trust their teachers and engage more effectively in school. Furthermore, some teachers proposed the connections between educators and students can mitigate problems in the school setting. When a teacher discussed the difficulties students were having with a principal, she suggested, "If they actually sat down and talked to her, and they did have some type of relationship, then they wouldn't have the issues that they have." As such, the teachers perceived that relationships were pivotal to students' success in school, and that educators should emphasize the creation of these connections in order for students to have positive educational experiences.

However, as described earlier, a variety of challenges exist that strain teachers interpersonal skills, complicating the creation of these essential relationships. To elaborate on some of these challenges, one teacher explained, "If you're not able to thrive in the most chaotic and volatile environment, I mean, imaginable, in public education, the whole year could be a wash for you. Because once the kids decide what type of person you are, and teacher you are, they don't unlearn that." As such, many teachers acknowledged that a great deal of interpersonal skill is necessary to connect with students. Some asserted these abilities are often innate rather than professional. One explained, "We don't hire teachers based on their ability to build relationships. That's a personality thing, not a professional ability." In another example, a teacher, whom several students described as their favorite teacher, was unable to equate the quality of his relationship-building skills to any systematic process. As he said "I really wish I knew what exactly it is I do that makes kids want to stay in my class. Even if they don't want to do math, they still don't skip. You tell me. I got another teacher that asked me how I do it, and I'm not really sure. 'Cause I'm not *doing* it, I'm just being me. And they respond to that." As such, some teachers perceived that only those professionals with seemingly inborn abilities and capacities were successful in creating the relationships necessary for fostering success in their students.

Despite the potentially inherent nature of these skills, teachers provided insight into the specific interpersonal skills they and others employed that were successful in creating positive relationships with students. While personality and humor were referenced a number of times, teachers gave a great deal of attention to discussing the importance of sincerity and transparency when working with students. As the teacher who was quoted earlier continued, "I'm just honest with them. I'm very genuine. Kids seem to like that." Similarly, another teacher explained,

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"There's no point in pretending. If you pretend, you only come off as insincere and fraudulent, and that really hurts your credibility with them." As such, these educators suggest a critical variable in the creation of a relationship with a student was a teacher's ability to be honest and demonstrate authenticity.

The most commonly cited example teachers used to explain the importance of sincerity in relationship building was the significance of teachers' internal and private beliefs about students. Many teachers suggested students had a remarkable aptitude for discovering how teachers felt about them, influencing whether they would allow a relationship to form between them and a teacher. As described by one, "They're fiercely loyal, once they know why you're here. If you're here for the right reasons, they respond to that very honestly. If you're not here, if you don't want to be here and you were forced [to teach] here, they're going to know that too. But there's no faking them out. You can be very honest with them. That's what's nice." This perspective was shared by several teacher participants, many of whom would further explain that this phenomenon required them to have a genuine positive regard for their students, as well as for their placement at their school. As represented by one teacher's remarks, "As teachers and staff, we really need to figure out if this is something we want to do. Because the kids know when we don't want to be here. They smell it. And they feed on it. And if that's the case then, chances are, you should probably leave." As such, many teachers perceived that positive student-teacher relationships were possible through careful employment of genuine and honest interpersonal skills. In addition to these behavioral skills, teachers must possess a positive appreciation for students, both consciously and subconsciously, in order for sincerity and other interpersonal skills to be effective. Whether or not these interpersonal skills are innate or

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learned, they are described by teachers as essential ingredients in creating positive connections with students and improving their success in school.

In sum, teachers perceive that relationships served a critical role in creating positive school experiences for students. In some instances, positive student-teacher relationships were described as the primary determinant of a student's success. Teachers recognized, however, that creating these meaningful bonds was a particularly difficult at their school, thus requiring additional and advanced interpersonal skills. In particular, teachers perceived that honesty, genuineness, and a positive regard for students were essential for teachers to form relationships with their students. As such, teachers advocate greater emphasis be placed on refinement of professional relationship-building and interpersonal skills for the improvement of students' performance.

4.4.2 Cultural Competence

Much like students, teachers identified professional cultural competency as essential for creating positive school experiences for their students. Rather than emphasizing interpersonal cultural competency, however, teachers advocated for culturally and socially informed school practices, and the shaping of school policies that account for the unique needs of the students. In many ways, previously discussed barriers and facilitative factors teachers identified are representative of an overarching theme, which is that teachers believe their students have unique educational needs and thus unique pedagogical approaches are necessary for fostering their academic success. To review, teachers perceived students had a heightened vulnerability to school instability, thus warranting acute attention to consistency; students experienced multiple

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psychological and emotional challenges outside of school calling for an expansion and refinement of in-school support mechanisms; students displayed heightened sensitivity to relationships requiring professionals to demonstrate advanced interpersonal skills. As such, it can be understood that every teacher participant suggested school policies and practices would be more effective if they were designed with the unique needs of the students in mind. In addition, some teachers spoke specifically of the importance of cultural competency and framed these discussions within the context of a social justice perspective.

Some teachers perceived their students to face social and educational inequality, and that this disenfranchisement was exacerbated by a lack of cultural understanding. Overall, every teacher conveyed the perception that their students faced additional hardships in school compared to other students, and often had to work harder to achieve the same results. For example, one teacher described his students' educational disadvantage by telling the interviewer, "[Students here] got to work a little bit harder to do what, uh, Joe Shmoe from [a middle-class neighborhood] does, because you know, maybe he has the funding to get into school. Maybe he has the good-old-boy network that he can get there. These, these are realities of the world." Similar statements were made regarding the intersection of race and class, yet some teachers explained these issues were seldom recognized in school. As one teacher remarked, "And so, um, how do you teach a bunch of poor white kids, that they're in the same boat as the poor black kids, when they're not… We're just sending [our] kids out there. Totally not prepared. Good luck. Pretend like you have an equal shot." This teacher describes an educational inequality between low-income students of difference races and a total disregard for this social oppression in school. One teacher further attempted to provide an explanation for the "messages of

omission they're sending to the kids" by describing a phenomenon he has observed at the school. As he said, "People say, poverty's no excuse for kids not… it's not an excuse. But, you know, we say that so much that it becomes an excuse to ignore poverty. And I think that that's a real misleading narrative for schools." As such, some teachers demonstrated an awareness of racial, socioeconomic, and educational oppression; needs the school had overlooked to the detriment of their students.

To address these challenges, some teachers described methods of cultural competency that schools could, and should employ. Of the teachers who mentioned issues of inequality, almost all suggested the solution to these barriers was to discuss oppression openly with students, and for the school to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and tools to overcome discrimination and prejudice. As one teacher explained, "Did the women's movement talk about the glass ceiling? Or did they just pretend it wasn't there? You got to talk about your oppression in order to break through it. We have to unearth it. We have to present it, publicly, honestly, so that we can break it. Or else it will always be there." She followed this statement by recommending, "It's a really complicated dynamic, and you really have to have a deliberate school structure and a school philosophy to approach the class issue with sensitivity to race."

Other teachers supported this position and described ways in which students could be empowered as change-agents against their own oppression. For example, one teacher recommended, "The school must make a deliberate mission to teach these kids about the world that [is] out there. They have to know more, be smarter than, and work harder than the world around them wants them to." Another teacher explained, "My attitude is, our students need more agency within their own education. They don't have the language and the tools to put forth a

coherent analysis. But they know a lot, and, it's my job to extract it." The teacher proceeded to describe classroom scenarios where he introduced junior and senior high school students to prominent African American scholars and literature regarding Critical Race Theory and Afrocentric responses to Ruby Payne's poverty theories, among others. The teacher continued, "I can't say, 'The system is trying to screw you, give up.' Hell no! 'I expect you to grind and work hard, and beat it! And help change it!' That's a delicate dance, there. But I give them a space [in class] to be conservative. I give them a space to be progressive. I give them a space to be radical if they want. Some kids just say, 'Tear down the whole system.' I say, 'Let's do it!'" This teacher describes a curriculum and class structure he employs, which he perceives will better prepare students to understand and overcome oppression. As he described, students need a strong awareness of social justice and the scholarship in school that is directly relevant to their lives in order to be able to discuss and critically analyze these concepts in order to be successful.

Another teacher, however, cautioned educators regarding the incorporation of oppression curriculum in school, explaining, "It's really difficult to talk to the oppressed about oppression. You know? Because you risk [that] they internalize the oppression, and they feel worse." She continued by recommending that this knowledge must be accompanied by practical skills so as to enable students to "see the knowledge as empowerment" rather than a continuation of oppressive messages in school. Overall, the perspective teachers shared was that their students needed to understand inequality in order to overcome it, and that schools and educators were responsible for providing students a culturally competent and socially accurate education about the world in order to do so. Furthermore, teachers perceived that schools must adopt a deliberate social

justice orientation in order to accomplish it, and that empowering students must be facilitated through both knowledge and agency.

To support the success of institutional cultural competency, many teachers believed that educators needed to improve and refine their knowledge and perspective about poverty, race, and social class. Some suggested many educators at the school demonstrated an inadequate or incomplete knowledge and appreciation for the social context of the school and the marginalization experienced by their students. Others suggested the school administration had insufficiently prepared and trained educators in culturally-relevant practices. To describe teachers' lack of cultural awareness, one teacher told the interviewer, "Even if they're the best intentioned, [teachers] don't realize that they're screwing up because they don't understand what's really happening in the world with these kids, and what messages these kids are getting. And [they] really don't know how to love on the poor black kids. It's cultural blindness. A lot of people call it racism."

Furthermore, one teacher, who admitted her cultural competence was limited, explained that the teacher training she had been received did little to support her improvement of these skills. As she explained, "We were being lectured about the underprivileged student, the racial issues, and being told that the scariest thing is the 'white woman.' That's what we were told, 'What do black males fear the most? The white woman.' And that was it! Like… what did *that* mean?! We had to do readings– I did it, sure. But, I don't know, that was just a bizarre experience." The interviewer then asked, "Do you think any of the trainings were helpful? Did it improve your interaction with the students?" The teacher laughed and replied, "No." Other teachers were also critical of the school's cultural competency training, as they perceived it was

conducted poorly, diluting and misrepresenting the issues it sought to address. As represented by one teacher's statement, "Like, they [i.e. the school administration], they threw the term social justice around at the beginning of the year, very casually. And I'm pretty sure that only ten percent of the people in the room knew what that meant. I mean, that's a serious concept. I treat it very seriously. Don't be flippant with that." He continued this discussion later in the interview, when he said, "So, to throw around the term social justice, I think it really took a lot of meaning out of that word, for a lot of these people. It's sad, too. Social justice is absolutely opposed to every single thing that's happening in this building. Categorically. And here we are. Teaching 'for social justice' inside of a system that opposes it." As such, teachers advocated that in order for educators to successfully engage in culturally competent practices, greater care must be given to teacher training. Furthermore, they contended that the presence of culturally relevant rhetoric does not necessarily ensure a professional understanding of these concepts, nor an appropriate translation to practice.

In sum, teachers identified an imperative yet complex role of cultural competence in the school. In all cases, culturally competent educators were seen as having the ability to lead students to more positive school experiences by empowering them to challenge society oppression and disenfranchisement. Teachers recommended the adoption of cultural relevant approaches on an institutional, school-wide level where educational policies and practices are designed with the explicit intention of ameliorating social and educational injustice. As such, these practices must entail an acknowledgement and study of social oppression and the fostering of students' skills in challenging and overcoming these deeply entrenched social norms. For this approach to be successful, teachers suggested educators must be properly equipped to engage

and participate in these practices, and as such, should be required to undergo intensive cultural

awareness training.

5.0   IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The results of student and teacher interviews provide insight about education debt in schools serving predominantly low-income African American youth. To review, education debt is the conceptualization of the influence of long-term social and educational inequality on students' school experiences. This theory argues that centuries of poverty and racism have altered how low-income African American students interact with educational systems, as well as how education systems interact with low-income African American students. Based on an analysis of student and teacher perceptions, I have described the challenges these students face and the possible solutions to these challenges they suggest. Most of what both students and teachers report is consistent with existing literature, while some findings were surprising. I now turn to understanding these perspectives through the lens of education debt and end by discussing recommendations for future action and research.

5.1   LIMITATIONS

5.1.1   Sample

The size and characteristics of this sample may present limitations for research findings. The sample was small, consisting of nine students and six teachers. It is possible that other participants could have provided additional and different perspectives. Furthermore, the majority of student participants were recruited through an afterschool program. These students may represent the perspectives of a particular cohort rather than the entire student body (i.e., those students able and willing to participate in afterschool programs). The majority of student participants were also female. Only two male students participated in this study and both were in the 12th grade. Thus, findings may not represent the perspectives of all male students, particularly those who are considering leaving school before reaching the 12th grade.

The teacher sample is also limited. Of the six teacher participants, only three were faculty teachers (i.e. trained and certified teachers). Two teacher participants were graduate fellows, whose role involved providing academic, behavioral, and emotional support and mentorship. These teachers were recruited into the fellowship program to work with low-income African American males, though they were required to work with both males and females. These teachers also received graduate level instruction regarding best-practice methodology for students at East Side Academy. The afterschool teacher had no formal educational training, though she had several years of experience working with low-income African American students. As such, teacher findings are not representative of all trained and certified teachers. Rather, they suggest a range of educators' beliefs. Convenience sampling methods led the

research team to interview teachers whom students recommended. As such, it is possible the teacher sample over-represents educators who were more popular with these students. Furthermore, almost all teacher interviews occurred after school hours. As with the student sample this may represent the opinions of those teachers able and willing to remain after school and dedicate an hour of their time to participating in this study.

5.1.2 Collection Objectives

Data for this thesis originated from a project investigating single-sex public education. As such, interviews focused primarily on discussions related to the single-sex reconfiguration of classrooms and other changes occurring with the 2011 reform. Though interviewers encouraged participants to discuss a broad range of topics, they did not have prepared questions outside the scope of that project's objectives. Discussions pertaining to poverty, racism, and education debt occurred as a natural course of the interview, as participants answered open-ended and unstructured follow-up questions. This dynamic poses a number of limitations as well as strengths to consider when drawing implications from these findings.

These data are inherently less systematic, as participants were not asked directly to respond to questions from a research protocol for this thesis. This could suggest that respondents provided information that was of the greatest importance to them. It is also possible that some respondents did not share their opinions completely because they were not asked, or perhaps were guarded in their responses, or simply not prompted to think about the issues systematically. This also implies findings may be incomplete, as it is possible some participants did not reveal

the full extent of their perspectives. Had participants been asked to respond systematically to the same research protocol, it is possible their responses may have differed.

The objectives of the interview may have skewed the lens through which relevant data were discussed. As participants were informed that the purpose of the interview was to explore school experiences after the 2011 reform, they may have tailored their responses in ways that favored discussions about the administration and school policies, rather than students' experiences in general. This limitation was particularly salient for teacher participants, whose interviews were dominated by discussions of administrative shortcomings. Similarly, the research questions provided an opportunity to explore themes related to the community, however, participants provided few perspectives about the role of the community, possibly because the interview objectives only applied to within-school experiences. It is possible that different and more comprehensive information could have been obtained had the interview focus been more structured.

5.1.3 Ethnography

While there are a number of strengths to conducting in-depth qualitative interviews, the limitation of ethnography must also be considered. Steps were taken to minimize the influence of some of these factors; however, other problems are inherent to the methodology. First, in-depth interviews explored the subjective experiences of participants. Second, interviews were conducted at different times throughout the school year. As the environment at East Side Academy changed during the interview period, it is possible the perceptions of participants changed as well. When changes in perspectives appeared to be significant (i.e. teachers'

perspectives about poor administrative support), the date of the interview was considered in the analysis. However, throughout the majority of my analysis, the timing of the interviews was not considered.

Finally, interview responses can be influenced by a number of factors which influence the information provided. For example, the mood of the participants at the time of the interview, their recent experiences, the interviewer's characteristics, as well as the interviewer's skill level can all influence the data that were collected. Various techniques were employed to reduce the effect of these forces, though some influences could not be avoided. For example, data were collected by a diverse team of interviewers, including both East Side Academy students and university researchers. Interviewers were both African American and white, representing a range of ages, and predominantly female which may have affected participant responses in ways unknown. All interviewers were trained, and had opportunities to practice interviewing skills, though some interviewers were more experienced than others. The diversity of interviewers functioned as both a strength and a weakness. For example, when teachers were interviewed by a student researcher, their responses were observably guarded and some refused to respond to sensitive questions. However, when student researchers interviewed other student participants, responses appeared more candid when compared with those responses from interviews conducted by university researchers. Other patterns between interviewer and participant characteristics may be discernible through a different type of analysis, particularly with regard to race, though no additional trends were obvious. Furthermore, in light of unfavorable media coverage of East Side Academy, a few teachers explained (either before or after their interviews) that they were cautious about making critical comments about their school.

5.2   THE PRESENCE OF EDUCATION DEBT AT EAST SIDE ACADEMY

What can students' and teachers' perceptions tell us about education debt? It is clear that poverty and racism affect students at East Side Academy. This idea was supported by discussions regarding the barriers to students' academic success, which reveal that students at East Side academy face a number of challenges that other, more privileged, students do not.   In fact some participants stated explicitly the challenges they identified resulted from poverty and racism.

5.2.1   Behavioral Manifestation of Education Debt

Most notably, students and teachers discussed the presence of severe behavior problems in the classroom. Interviews suggest multiple causes for this behavior, as participants described forces both within and outside the school environment, implying a possible relationship between the two. Teachers believed, for example, that many students acted-out because they were suffering psychologically from negative out-of-school experiences related to poverty, such as witnessing violence or experiencing abuse and neglect. Their deduction mirrors that of the American Psychological Association (2013) which suggests a number of behavior problems are associated with the psychological trauma of poverty.   However, teachers described scenarios where the influence of a students' trauma was intensified because East Side Academy had limited behavioral health resources. To recall, teachers explained school officials regarded many students' behaviors as delinquent, and they were punished rather than managed within the school

Furthermore, the school employed one social worker whom teachers described as overwhelmed and unable to assist students properly.

Students described a similar exacerbating relationship between within-school and out-of-school forces. For example, some students believed their classmates acted-out to avoid learning, echoing Delpit's (2012) theory that students who have experienced internalized racism will act-out to avoid situations where their perceived inabilities could be revealed. Students expanded on this idea, as they also believed behavior problems were intensified because their educators often struggled to address these students' behaviors appropriately. As they saw it, these professional shortcomings led to a focus on discipline; a solution many students perceived as compromising their learning. The struggles many educators experienced with regard to behavior problems, and their heavy-handed response to it, raise a number of questions about effective discipline in schools serving predominantly low-income African American students. According to Payne (2006) behavior problems challenge all schools, but what made the behavior problems at East Side Academy so difficult for educators to resolve? Is there something different about behavior problems emanating from poverty that require a unique method of intervention? If so, are educators struggling in their classrooms because they are employing traditional methods of behavior management that do not address the unique needs of low-income, particularly African American students? Or, is this struggle more closely related to concentration effect (Wilson, 1990), where more students are disruptive due to concentrated poverty thus depleting limited resources? Student and teacher interviews do not suggest a greater number of East Side Academy students are disruptive when compared to other schools, only that these disruptions are more harmful because they are often unmitigated.

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Furthermore, the possibility that various school practices may actually be *increasing or intensifying* behavior problems raises concern as it is clearly not the intension of schools to promote such disruptions. In fact, despite participants' reference to out-of-school forces encouraging behavior problems, the majority of the barriers to students' success were described as occurring within the school. For example, students described discipline, perceived as the dominant response to behavior problems, as being inconsistent, ineffective, and often unfair. This perspective would suggest that rather than the students' disruptions being the problem, it is the system of discipline the school employed to resolve these disruptions that is causing behavior problems in the classroom; problems students and teachers identify as being a challenge to learning. Such a phenomenon would mirror Yuan and Che's (2012) findings, that it is possible to provoke student behavior problems by employing weak discipline systems, judging students unfairly, and by lacking engaging practices. Similarly, teachers described that it was difficult to maintain order in their classrooms because they received "poor administrative support" and students were forced to endure inconsistencies in the school environment that compromised learning. Both students and teachers also explained that many educators lacked the ability to engage with their students and some were described as lacking strong relationship-building skills while others struggled with cultural competency suggesting a potential relationship between the two.

Based on student and teacher perceptions it is possible to speculate the manifestation of behavior problems was equally, if not more, dependent on what transpired once a student entered the school building than what they brought with them from their low-income community. As such, this suggests education debt affects the efficacy of schools serving low-income communities. From this lens, the behavior manifestations of education debt are not only visible

in the psychological and emotional challenges students' face because of racism and poverty, but also in how schools interact under these circumstances to create new barriers, possibly ones which exacerbate behavior challenges.

5.2.2   A Lack of Cultural Competence and Education Debt

Students and teachers also made connections to education debt when they described students' barriers to academic success in terms of cultural competence. Students and teachers explained that poverty and race characterized students significantly, in both positive and negative ways. Both students and teachers suggested educators must have a personal and professional appreciation for these factors in order to engage students and create meaningful learning experiences. Descriptions of successful educators suggest professionals who were aware of and consider culture while still being able to see their students as individuals. In addition, teachers' discussions of the importance of relationship-building skills could also be connected to cultural competence, as these skills were described as involving an honest, positive regard for students, a quality consistent with cultural competence. As such, findings suggest cultural competence is an essential component needed for students' success at East Side Academy.

However, the necessity of cultural competence is not what suggests a connection between these skills and education debt. Rather, it is students' and teachers' perceptions that students at East Side Academy were *likely* to interact with professionals who lacked strong cultural competency skills that is significant and an unexpected result. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), cultural competency is a normative process within successful schools, one that is often automatic in environments where educators and students share the same culture. From this

perspective, it is possible that students at East Side Academy were likely to interact with educators who struggled with being culturally competent because students and educators were culturally dissimilar. Student interviews support this notion, identifying income as the mechanism for the cultural differences between their educators and themselves. To recall, many students took pride in being "from the hood" and described it as essential to their identities, behaviors, and learning styles. They further described educators who struggled with understanding what this meant to them, thus effective engagement between student and educator suffered. Similarly, teachers explained that many educators failed to appreciate how racism worked against students' academic and lifelong options, and thus could not properly equip their students for success in adulthood.

These views suggest poverty and racism led students at East Side Academy to become estranged from the professionals employed to teach them. A more difficult question to address is why a gulf defined by race and income has been allowed to persist, and how schools can bridge the gap between low-income African American students and their educators successfully. From this study it is difficult to determine if this chasm is influenced more by race, income, or the synergistic result of the two? Regarding education debt, the effects of long-term racism and poverty have created a unique school environment for low-income African American students, where the significance of race and class are only beginning to be addressed. As such, interviews suggest education debt manifests culturally through increasing the likelihood that race and class difference will be significant barriers to effective student-educator relationships, and the possibility that students may be lacking a culturally-relevant education.

5.2.3 Professional Manifestation of Education Debt

On the one hand, the concept of education debt reinforces, perhaps intensifies the need for educators to have traditional pedagogical skills. For example, relationship-building and interpersonal skills, group work, consistency, authoritative and supportive leadership, and a positive regard for students are long established conventions in pedagogy (Payne, 2006). However, not all educators were described as possessing these skills. It may be possible that educators experienced in the classroom have begun to suppress these skills because of the poor administrative support they perceived. Or perhaps the stressors of poverty and racism intensify the demands placed on educators, requiring a higher standard of pedagogical mastery. On the other hand, education debt suggests the need for educators to possess additional skills in their work with low-income African American students. Findings suggest that traditionally-trained educators, though qualified, may struggle at East Side Academy without advanced training in African American culture, the synergistic impact of poverty and racism, and classroom approaches that help educators understand, identify, and address classroom behavior in ways that do not simply punish students. While these skills may not be traditionally required, both students and teachers described these skills as essential at East Side Academy. For example, in some instances, participants described an educator as objectively satisfactory, yet unsuccessful at East Side Academy because they did not understand the needs of low-income African American students, again suggesting what defines professional excellence at East Side Academy may be different from how it would be defined at schools not composed of a majority of low-income African American students.

The relationship between education debt, professional training needs, and professionalism in a classroom composed of low-income African American students is difficult to understand in full. Delpit (2012) suggests that low-income and African American students are often "school dependent" (p. xix), as they rely on educators to facilitate their academic as well as cognitive and social development. She explains this dependence makes students more sensitive to their educator's abilities. It may be possible that such a scenario is occurring at East Side Academy, though no data would support this directly. But interviews viewed through the lens of education debt suggest professional competence at East Side Academy requires educators to demonstrate mastery of traditional classroom skills and perhaps seek additional training in skills that acknowledge the challenges inherent to low-income African American students from high-poverty neighborhoods.

5.2.4 Institutional Reactions to Education Debt

Education debt has been used to structure the discussions of behavior, culture, and professionalism at East Side Academy. Remaining, however, are themes to be explored regarding institutional reactions to the experiences at East Side Academy as seen through the lens of education debt. One theme suggested by education debt is a redefinition of the purpose of education for students at East Side Academy. As teachers explained, East Side Academy served as one of the primary vehicles for their students to receive an education that might allow them to exit poverty. Students not affected by education debt are likely to conceptualize school as a means to get a job, a process leading to college, and a means to economic stability (Pew Charitable Trust, Economic Mobility Project, 2012). East Side Academy students were also

perceived by their teachers to be gaining access to *upward mobility*, as well as economic stability. This perception is concurrent with findings from the Pew Charitable Trust's Economic Mobility Project (2012). However, respondents generally did not agree that the goals of upward mobility were emphasized by the school.

Education debt could be seen as manifest in the comprehensive school reform imposed upon East Side Academy. There is no question that before the 2011 reform, East Side Academy students were suffering. The systems that result in education debt had crippled the efficacy of the school, transforming it into what Wacquant (2002, as cited in Noguera, 2011) describes as a negative social asset to the community. As the challenges facing East Side Academy were unique to the school district, reformers turned to unconventional and experimental methods to improve the school. However, student and teacher interviews indicate these school changes provoked a number of significant problems for both of them. Most notably, the reform led to even greater instability within the school environment because polices were revised frequently, various approaches were unsuccessful or were discontinued before they had been fully implemented. The chaos caused by the reform served to add to the existing challenges facing these students, resulting in an educational environment opposite of that which the initiative had sought to create. Of course, reform inherently involves a level of risk, but the School Board appeared more willing to take risks with East Side Academy than with other schools in the district – a manifestation of the concept of education debt. And many of the risks associated with reform were realized at East Side Academy. Therefore, it could be argued education debt influenced decisions about East Side Academy; moreover, the school reform efforts had the net effect of increasing education debt.

Despite students' and teachers' in-depth awareness of the multiple manifestations of education debt (though they had not these words), a troubling theme throughout the findings suggests that East Side Academy, as a system, was markedly impassive towards the forces of poverty and racism. In every interview, students and teachers identified a failure on the part of the school to recognize the unique needs of students that resulted from their experiences with poverty and racism, the hallmarks of education debt. For example, participants identified few emotional and psychological resources available to the students suffering trauma and behavior challenges as a result of the extreme poverty they experienced in their segregated neighborhood. In fact, one teacher explained that East Side Academy employed only one social worker for the entire student body, and another explained that disruptive students were regarded as delinquent. Similarly, both students and teachers described the use of a discipline system that would have been substandard in any educational setting, not to mention in a school where students were significantly more behaviorally challenging. The presence of the aforementioned shortcomings (i.e., minimal cultural competency training, poor administrative support, teachers void of traditional pedagogical competencies) suggests East Side Academy provided minimal resources designed to account for the added demands imposed on students and educators because of poverty and racism. As such, it would appear that East Side Academy functioned as though its students were not experiencing oppression – a denial that functions to facilitate rather than mitigate the academic disenfranchisement of these students.

The manifestation of education debt then implies a need to re-conceptualize the term "at-risk." In the traditional sense, the students at East Side Academy could be considered at-risk because they exhibit characteristics that made their learning more challenging. Students and

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teachers, on the other hand, suggested these students are also at-risk because they are underserved by a school system that chooses not to address the challenges they face that increase their risk. Therefore, education debt manifests at East Side Academy through the very omission of its existence, thus perpetuating inequality and adding to the education debt that is owed these low-income African American students. Unfortunately a common argument is that schools should not be held responsible for addressing poverty and racism, thus not addressing repaying the education debt owed these students. Yet schools have addressed a number of other social issues. For example, schools have taken an active role in the fight against obesity, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and provided resources for special education, students with physical disabilities, health and sexual education, conflict resolution, guidance counseling, home economics, and trade skills. But these social problems are common needs in dominant society. When resources are required to address problems related to marginalized minority students, schools appear less willing to become involved.

From this perspective, education debt has manifested itself at East Side Academy through an institutional negligence to provide for the education of students experiencing oppression. The circumstances of their poverty and racism have led these students to "disappear" from the rhetoric and practices of their schools in the training of our teachers and the education of our students. In this way, education debt stretches beyond the individual and has transformed East Side Academy into an institution that perpetuates the oppression of its students. Education debt *is* a school that serves predominantly low-income African American students but does not describe fighting poverty and racism as one of its primary goals. Education debt *is* a school that hires a degree-holding, certified education professional who is only successful with students of

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his or her own race and socioeconomic background. Education debt *is* a school that employs one social worker, yet has a majority of student who struggle from psychological trauma and behavior problems associated with extreme poverty and racism. It would appear that education debt *is* the disenfranchisement of students at East Side Academy that has led its educators and administrators to accept disparities through an omission of their significance.

5.3   REPAYING EDUCATION DEBT

Now I turn to a discussion of strategies to acknowledge and repay education debt at East Side Academy. In this section, I organize participants' perceptions of factors that I interpret as leading to educational success into themes that will address education debt.

5.3.1   Increase Behavioral and Emotional Support Resources

Twelve years ago Dr. Pamela Cantor (Nocera, 2012) described the behavior of low-income children as indicative of high levels of trauma exposure. She reported observations of students from high-poverty neighborhoods who were distressed, reactive, sad, aggressive, and easily distracted. In high-poverty schools, where this behavior is concentrated, she stated, "chaos reigned." Similar descriptions of behavior were provided by the teacher and student interviews in this study. Hence, limited behavioral health resources are suggested as a barrier to the academic success of students at East Side Academy. This suggests a need to increase behavioral and emotional resources, perhaps going so far as a school-wide utilization of psychologically

supportive practices. Employing more mental health professionals and incorporating them with school policy planning may encourage administrations to make behaviorally and emotionally supportive decisions for the students in their high-poverty schools. In this way, schools serving low-income African American students could commit to reducing the challenges students bring to school with them, and they must make decisions about how to work with these students within the school setting based on an awareness that does not inadvertently aggravate existing challenges facing these students.

5.3.2   Strengthen Professional Training and Recruitment

Education debt suggests a need for educator training that includes programs to teach educators how to work with low-income African American students. The words of the East Side Academy students and teachers themselves suggest this. East Side Academy educators may have been better-served by backgrounds that included a practical knowledge of developmental psychology, diagnostic evaluation, behavior reinforcement, and trauma as it applies specifically to low-income African American students from high-poverty neighborhoods as well as an understanding the historical/sociological oppression of African Americans.

Students' descriptions of the skills good teachers need in their classrooms are similar to Baumrind's (1966) style of authoritative parental control. This approach is consistent with student descriptions of effective teachers whose expectations remain high, while encouraging students to conform because they were given the freedom and support to function independently. In terms of training, educators would know how to exert firm control while not "hemming-in"

their students with restrictions. This approach involves establishing clear behavioral expectations, explaining the rationale behind these policies, and empowering students to exist autonomously within these standards.

Flowing from this is the need for educators to be trained in cultural relevancy both as a matter of education and continuing professional development. Findings from this study support the "Cultural Relevancy" training model presented in Ladson-Billing's *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2009). This model explains that education students should be required to complete courses that develop their awareness of the central role cultural plays in peoples' lives. These courses provide student teachers the opportunity to critique school systems and encourage them to become agents of change within educational institutions. Student teaching experiences that provide immersion in African American culture (as well as other cultures) are most effective. Student teachers need the opportunity to observe culturally-competent educators, and schools designate "master educators" with strong cultural competency as mentors. Ladson-Billings also recommends schools of education extend the hours required for student teachers, and mandate all student teachers to work in a "high-poverty" school for at least one semester.

The Cultural Relevancy (Ladson-Billings, 2009) model also includes guidelines for institutions serving predominantly low-income African American students; guidelines consistent with the information provided by the student and educator participants in my study. First, when hiring new professionals, candidates should have an expressed interest in working with African American students and have experience (through their student teaching or previous employment) working in a high-poverty school to be considered for the position. Schools should extend mentorship opportunities to newly hired professionals. On-going professional development

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should also build skills related to the history of contemporary African American culture and social justice scholarship.

Equitable distribution of professionals who demonstrate excellence in teaching should be a priority. School districts should consider deploying the best teachers to schools with higher numbers of students eligible for free or reduced lunch services. This process should *not* involve a depletion of skill from schools with lower numbers of reduced or free-lunch eligible students. To the contrary, this involves a commitment to increase the numbers of great teachers teaching students at schools with larger numbers of low-income students. This assumes the best teachers are those who will address the needs identified by my student participants – those who provide additional academic out-of-school support, incorporate small group collaboration, sociopolitical awareness related to poverty and racism, and a commitment to social justice, all characteristics identified as necessary by the participants in my study.

5.3.3   Transform Schools into Institutions of Social Justice

Overall, addressing and repaying education debt suggests a comprehensive and systematic school model designed with the explicit intention of achieving educational and social justice for low-income African American students. As such, *every* practice, policy, and philosophy employed by schools serving low-income African American students must be carefully examined and designed to address the manifestations of poverty and racism in the classroom. Schools must recognize that overcoming poverty and racism through academic empowerment is a primary goal. In so doing, the practice of learning is re-conceptualized as a means to enable students to overcome their oppression through education.

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Discussions of poverty should be candid and well-rounded, giving students an understanding of the circumstances influencing their lives and the opportunity to analyze, think critically, and express their views. Special attention should be paid to providing students with the practical skills to make use of this knowledge and take an active role in the rejection of racist and classist ideologies. Students taught by well-trained educators can demand greater equity from the institutions serving them and their families. Described by teachers as "agency," skills to achieve this include self-advocacy and community organizing skills, persuasive writing, public speaking and presentation, political science with attention to the democratic process, and a mastery of basic education concepts. In this way, social and racial empowerment can serve as a mechanism for encouraging the mastery of academic competencies while also providing students additional skills to repay education debt. This model supports Delpit's (2012) recommendations that low-income African American students must be provided more content, access to critical thinking and basic skill cultivation, as well as the emotional ego strength and skills "to challenge racist social views of their own competence and worthiness" (p. xix).

Schools, particularly those serving low-income African American students, should become institutions where "school dependent children" can thrive and are provided the same opportunities the children from high-come families are afforded. As such, extra-curricular activities and programs should be plentiful and properly financed. These programs should supplement traditional education and provide students access to the arts, special interest clubs, sports and recreational outlets, mentorships, college preparation, and academic support. Students should be able to rely on schools for both their academic needs as well as their non-academic needs through the fostering of a school culture where educators provide students with support both in and out of the classroom. As indicated by my participants, the best classrooms should be

small, with group work and collaboration the norm, and student leadership and mentoring an integral part of student development. Creative and flexible parent and/or guardian engagement methods should also be developed. As indicated, some parents and/or guardians may have difficulty participating in their student's academics and additional resources should be dedicated to developing strategies that allow this essential interaction to take place. These methods may involve providing transportation for parents and caregivers, employing multiple parental engagement specialists, and facilitating educators' direct and consistent communication with parents and/or guardians.

In sum, schools will be more successful with low-income African American students by acknowledging the presence of education debt, understanding how this debt has influenced students, and changing practices in order to repay the education debt we owe these students. This process requires a commitment to educational justice and cooperation at every level of education, from the School Board and district administrators, to the school administrators, teachers, and support staff. We must be willing to make the educational needs of low-income African American students our priority or the forces of poverty and racism will supersede the equality we value.

5.4   FUTURE RESEARCH

Education debt is an appropriate lens through which to view the school experiences of low-income African American students. It provides a means for making sense of the descriptions of

barriers to students' academic success and identified classroom, school, and community factors that facilitate student engagement and classroom learning, the goals of this study.

Many methods for repaying education debt are discussed in contemporary literature. However, as indicated by the participants in this study, much remains absent from East Side Academy and likely all our schools with predominantly low-income African American students from high-poverty communities. Future research is needed to develop strategies to expand public school's access to empirically-based culturally competent teaching techniques, behavioral and emotional intervention models, and strength-based empowerment. Yet, many of the mechanisms for repaying education debt are financially unrealistic for schools, particularly in light of recent federal and state education funding cuts. Therefore, research is needed to enable schools to utilize best-practice methodologies in ways that are economically viable, both by reducing the cost of such methods and advocating for continued support of public education. As education debt also represents a transformation of the field of professional education, more research is needed to understand how post-secondary education can be conceptualized to create educators who accept the concept of education debt and are prepared to repay it. Finally, continued research is needed to appreciate the relationship between of poverty and race, and the differences and similarities between low and higher-income students of the same race. As such, social work and education professionals can refine their understanding of students' barriers to academic success, thus improving strategies available to eradicate these barriers and repay education debt.

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