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Discovering the Key to Academic Success for Black Students: the Process by Which Black
Students are Academically Successful

By

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CAPSTONE

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctorate of Education, Ed.D.
Interdisciplinary Leadership, Not-for-Profit and Social Entrepreneurship Concentration

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Dedication

First and foremost, I give honor to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I pray that this work fulfills some small part of my purpose and brings You glory. To my mother who has sacrificed much and supported me always, thank you for believing that I am capable of great things. I hope I make you proud. To my “big brother” Keith who has been the persistent and consistent energy pushing me along to the finish line, I appreciate you more than you know. Finally, I want to dedicate this work to marginalized, disenfranchised, overlooked, and silenced students everywhere; I hear you, and I see you. This is for you.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

The racial academic achievement gap in America's public schools persists although there is solid research explaining the elements that have led to and support it. Much of this research is deficit-based and highlights the vulnerabilities of those who fall at the bottom of that gap. Not enough research is invested in celebrating, highlighting, or exploring the experiences of the Black students who experience a reality of performing near or at the top of the gap. The research presented here was designed to provide a strengths-based view of a marginalized portion of America's public-school students. The goal of this study is to uncover the common factors that contribute to academic success for Black students who attend public schools in suburbs surrounding the south Chicagoland area. The findings indicate that self-efficacy, school counselors, and resilience, among other factors, are characteristics held in common by the participants of this study. The practices and conditions highlighted help these students overcome the challenges of over a century of institutionalized racism and decades of factors that contribute to the racial academic gap between Black and White children who attend American public schools.

Key Words: Racial Congruence, Rosenthal Effect, Critical Race Theory, Pygmalion, de facto, de jure, segregation, integration

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The racial achievement gap is a nationwide issue, and the study of it has uncovered several contributing factors which include institutionalized racism, lack of support in the classroom, and segregated academic experiences in a post-segregation era. These factors are challenges that many times have a direct negative impact on the academic performance of Black American students. There have been many initiatives designed to improve the academic outlook for Black children; however, it is difficult to immediately and/or completely eradicate the racism ingrained in the institutional foundation designed to benefit a Eurocentric, class-based society. This research endeavors to take an alternative approach to a familiar problem. Instead of dwelling on ways in which challenges faced by Black children tend to lead to academic failure, this research will shift the focus to Black American students who are meeting and exceeding academic standards.

Identifying the barriers to academic success for Black students has been valuable work and is the foundation on which this research begins. This approach to understanding the state of the racial achievement gap is deficit-based; framing the topic with a focus on why Black students fail and emphasizing those failures. This research acknowledges the Black students who attend America's public schools who are meeting and/or exceeding academic expectations in ways that are demonstrated by enrollment and performance in honors and advanced placement courses, standardized test scores, and/or as simply reflected by grade performance.

Involved in a system that has been overwhelmingly biased and that has presented factors proven to inhibit Black student populations, these students have demonstrated that they have the ability and capacity to compete academically with their peers. The number of students is small:

in 2017, according to the National Report Card created using data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), just 13% of Black 8th grade students are proficient in math nationwide. Two percent of Black students scored as Advanced. More than half of America's 8th grade Black students, 53%, cannot perform basic math (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Reading results are somewhat better: 60% of 8th grade Black students have a basic grasp of reading, 18% are proficient, and 1% are advanced (NCES, 2018). The data reinforces what we already know: Black children can learn, and they are capable of academic excellence. The existing research that uses an anti-deficit approach to the analysis of the education of Black students, however, is limited. This study seeks to focus on these students, discover what they have in common, and develop best practices for all Black children in similar backgrounds.

Before attempting to discover how Black students overcome obstacles in America's education system, the researcher will spend some time outlining some of these obstacles and their origins. Many of the theories that explain why the racial achievement gap exists can be traced back to one recurring theme that manifests itself in numerous ways. Historically, institutionalized racism has allowed biases to thrive in educational policies, curriculums, standardized testing, and the classroom. Starting with the *Brown vs. Board* decision of 1954, what follows will attempt to tell a story of how the proposed solution to the problem of educational inequality, substandard conditions and resources for Black children, created more difficulties in ways which are still felt today – despite many efforts to alleviate them. The paper will then discuss three of the major theories developed to help stakeholders understand the difficulties highlighted in this timeline. Following this, the stage will be set for research designed to discover how students who defy the general outcomes of their demographic achieve

this success. The results of the research will be presented thoroughly along with recommendations for future educational stakeholders.

Background of Study

Many researchers have invested time and resources to uncover and explain the causes of the poor education the majority of Black students in America receive on a regular basis (Anyon, Jenson, Altschul, et. al., 2014; Baysu, Phalet, & Brown, 2014; Berkshire, 2014; Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; Fairclough, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Jones & Jing, 2014; Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, & Daftary-Kapur, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lutz, 2017; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Ogbu, 2003; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010). There has also been a wealth of research published about theories and the impact of various interventions by way of implemented practices and/or programs that address some of the difficulties present in the school system that negatively affect Black children (Ashworth, Van Bockern, Ailts, et. al., 2008; Ayvazo & Aljadeff-Abergel, 2014; Bal, Schrader, Afacan, & Mawene, 2016; Goosens, Lammers, Ontrust, et. al, 2016; Parsons, 2017; Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003; Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, & Flannery, 2015; Varnham, 2005; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Where the research seems to fall short is in presenting cases, examples, practices, or methods that demonstrate or lead to Black student success despite the challenges that persist in the nation's education system. There seems to be very little research dedicated to analyzing Black students who perform well in school and how they are able to do so.

Knowing and understanding some of the realities faced by Black children throughout America's history helps to build context surrounding the current data. Much of the existing foundational research on education and its impact on Black students attempts to answer the question of why Black students fail and who or what is to blame for their failure. The answers to

the questions are layered and evolve as the context evolves: the times, the political climate, and the people involved. The following will briefly discuss the factors challenging Black student success that are most relevant to this study: institutionalized racism and its impact on curriculum, bias (the effects of which have been explored with Critical Race Theory) and how teacher expectations impact Black student performance, and the implications of racial congruence.

Historic and Persistent Challenges for Black Public School Students

Much of what is experienced by Black students in American classrooms can be categorized under the theme of institutionalized racism which is the foundation of Critical Race Theory. Lynn (2006) discusses in depth how institutionalized racism impedes the ability of schools to function as tools of empowerment for racially marginalized (i.e. Black) students. Lynn (2006) asserts that education was never intended to have “liberatory consequences for African Americans” (p. 116), but that “schooling” - defined as the process whereby students are forced to learn skills without connecting them to broader social, political, and economic processes in society (p. 110) only extended the arm of the slave master and allowed “whites to continue to transmit Eurocentric values and morals to the oppressed” (p. 118). De La Mare (2014) also describes Eurocentrism, a guiding principle of institutionalized racism, in America’s schools by pointing out specifically its hold on social studies education. De La Mare (2014) describes how the National Council of the Social Sciences (NCSS) has excluded engagement with issues important to minority experiences. The NCSS, a group responsible for social studies methods textbooks, is “virtually bleached as white concerns are centered and all others largely excluded” (De La Mare, 2014, p. 138). De La Mare (2014) continues, “In textbooks, colonization efforts are presented from a Eurocentric perspective and normative chapters are based on attributes of the white experience while blacks are in chapters on deviance, social

problems, or race relations” (138). Black children are inundated with a curriculum that demonstrates little value or appreciation for their heritage or contributions beyond the obligatory Black History month. The remainder of the school year is spent learning biased or edited accounts of the past that represent several prominent figures as heroes although they committed questionable and/or egregious acts against marginalized communities. Content/curriculum will be explored in this research and analyzed for its impact on academic performance.

Not only does the curriculum have a profound impact on student learning, but the individuals who teach make a difference as well. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) linked teacher expectations to students’ academic performance. The teacher can be the most influential factor in a student’s academic success. Rosenthal and Jacobson’s (1968) theory that children live up or down to their teachers’ expectations was called the self-fulfilling prophecy. Students in recent studies demonstrated this phenomenon. Pringle (2010) interviewed students who confessed to underperforming when they knew that their teachers’ expectations were low and that the encouragement or lack thereof from educators sometimes discouraged them from pursuing academic challenges or opportunities (p. 38). In Trask-Tate’s (2014) research, close to one half of the Black students surveyed claimed they had been discouraged from joining advanced level courses and received lower grades than deserved because of their race. A student is quoted by Andrews and Gutwein (2017) describing how some educators may continue to harbor the negative belief that “students of color are anti-intellectual” and “incapable of demonstrating adaptive behaviors for schooling” (p. 5). These few examples may be insufficient for proving that the teachers in question do indeed have low expectations for their students of color, but the issue that remains is that the students in their classrooms believe this to be the case. Fiarman (2016) points out that bias affects not only discipline, but also student learning on a regular basis.

These biases impact who gets called on, what kind of feedback students receive on their work, who gets more praise or redirection, and the nature of communication with students' families (Fiarman 2016). This belief of low expectations among students has a profound impact on Black children and their peers psychologically, emotionally and, in many cases, academically. Perhaps these ongoing attitudes and biases should have been an expected result of a controversial Supreme Court decision in the mid-1950s.

The impact of institutionalized racism and teacher expectation on Black students can be viewed as a by-product of a Civil Rights victory. The fight in question was for Black students to be given equal access to quality resources, funding, and opportunity. In 1896, the Supreme Court's ruling of separate but equal in *Plessy v. Ferguson* resulted in conditions for Black children that were separate, but not often equal. Early on, the fight was focused on obtaining facilities, materials, funding, and opportunities that were equal in standard, quality, and quantity to White schools. When that push was unsuccessful, Civil Rights leaders and organizations began demanding access to White schools. While that access was eventually granted in 1954 through *Brown v. Board*, there would be other barriers erected - much less obvious and much more difficult to overcome. These barriers (White flight and redlining leading to the departure of funding for schools in Black communities, the lack of hiring and placement of Black staff in newly integrated schools, and other difficulties) work together to maintain many of the problematic conditions of legal (de jure) segregation. The Literature Review will expound on the far-reaching consequences of *Brown* in greater detail.

Addressing Academic Challenges Through an Anti-Deficit Lens

The evolution of Black education in America is relevant to this research to understand the impact still felt by Black students today. Deficit based research is a concept developed by

Valencia (2010) and sets the tone behind much of the foundational and historical research on the topic of Black student success. This approach is essentially negative, emphasizing failures and attributing them to cultural/racial deficiencies. Deficit-based research appears to blame the victim for not thriving in a setting that was not created for their success. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework serves as an alternative approach to the discussion about Black student success. The scope of the information included in this research is intended to provide sufficient argument that enough research has been conducted concerning the many deficits of Black education and will allow us to proceed with a more productive task: to attempt to identify factors that currently exist in schools, homes, and communities where Black students are experiencing academic success. Thus, the intent of this research is to learn how Black students are able to academically thrive in a system designed for them to fail.

Statement of the Problem

This study addresses the conditions impacting Black students' ability to demonstrate academic proficiency in American public schools. A student's academic performance can impact the trajectory of public school students' educational experiences and career outlooks. A student's grades can provide the justification for enrollment and exclusion regarding honors, advanced placement, and special studies courses. Opportunities to earn college credits or explore different courses of study can be prohibited based on coursework and grade point average. An analysis of factors that lead to success is essential in an effort to increase chances of success for future Black students, thereby increasing academic opportunities and learning and earning potential. Existing studies on this topic are limited; particularly research that surveys the population in question, seeking commonalities that may lead to success. Most of the research

addresses specific issues that contribute to the racial academic achievement gap and the results of a proposed solution to those issues.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify factors leading to Black students performing exceptionally well academically that align with existing literature and any other emerging patterns. The goal is to discover why and how Black students are experiencing academic success. This information can then be added to ongoing research that is moving towards a model for successful schools. The results can be added to the existing body of literature discussing what leads to increased academic performance for Black students. Specifically, this research seeks to fill a void in the anti-deficit approach to the racial achievement gap. Instead of focusing on why the gap is large and persistent, the research will highlight the success of students who excel despite the conditions that lead to the gap. The results will be published for policy makers, educational administrators, and other stakeholders.

Research Question

In light of the information presented in the research that focuses heavily on the ways in which Black students succumb to the challenges and obstacles present in the public education system, the question presented in this research approaches the topic from a different angle:

- What conditions impact Black students' ability to be academically successful?

Examining this question through an anti-deficit lens will hopefully assist with building a perspective that views Black children as resilient and more than capable of competing academically when the appropriate conditions are implemented, whether organically or as a component of a supplementary program, curriculum, or partnership.

Definition of Terms

Schooling - defined by Lynn (2006) as the process whereby students are forced to learn skills without connecting them to broader social, political, and economic processes in society (p. 110); “schooling” only extended the arm of the slave master and allowed “whites to continue to transmit Eurocentric values and morals to the oppressed” (p. 118)

De facto segregation - a separation of people that occurs by circumstance or consequence, not due to any legal intervention or imposition

De jure segregation - a separation of people due to an imposed law

Culture - habits, beliefs, dress, or practices typically associated with a group of people

Critical Race Theory - an examination of culture and power through the scope of race, law, education, politics, and power

Seasoning - the “de-Africanization or acculturation process accomplished through schooling-forcing non-Europeans to accept European American culture as their own” (Lynn 2006 p. 118).

Eurocentrism - a biased worldview centered around Western civilization and European

Imperialism

Implicit/Unconscious Racial Bias - the unconscious beliefs about a member of a certain social group

Oppositional Frame of Reference/Oppositional Culture - a theory that suggests that minority students intentionally underachieve to avoid being seen as “acting White” (Ogbu 2003)

Culturally Responsive Teaching - a pedagogy that emphasizes the importance of using appropriate cultural connections to teach students (Ladson-Billings 1994)

Multicultural Education - an education that attempts to include multiple perspectives, topics, and materials from varied cultural backgrounds

Curriculum Ghettos - De La Mare (2014) used this term to describe the phenomena where different cultures and their stories are not truly incorporated throughout public school curriculums, but contained and isolated from the American story

Racial Anxiety - increased stress experienced when interacting with people of a different race

Interest Convergence - a theory promoted by Bell (1976) that White people will only support racial justice when it benefits them in some way

Pygmalion Effect - a theory by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) used by Bell (1976) to suggest that the expectations and beliefs of those in power can affect the outcome of those under them; namely the influence that teachers can have over student outcomes

Herrenvolk Education - Leonardo's (2013) theory describes one standard of education for White students and another for Black students in the U.S.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Theoretical Framework

The Anti-Deficit Approach to Well-Known Public-School Issues

This research will utilize an anti-deficit framework as defined by Harper (2010) in its exploration of factors present in schools where Black students achieve the most success. The anti-deficit theory approaches analysis from the viewpoint of what has gone right, instead of what has gone wrong. It works to highlight factors that can be replicated or implemented for positive change, as opposed to looking for things that lead to failure. Harper (2010) highlights the tendency of researchers to use a deficit approach when analyzing specific phenomena. The focus is usually what is wrong in a specific case or example, presumably so work can be put forth towards a solution. Harper (2010) states that most empirical studies “amplify minority failure and deficits instead of achievement” (p. 64) and because of this we don’t know enough about the Black students in the same or similar settings who actually do achieve and what factors contribute to their successes. The alternative approach to focusing on the failings, or deficits, of a particular system or topic is to identify the components or practices that lead to success. When these elements are identified, they can be replicated in efforts of increasing future achievement.

While an anti-deficit approach is useful in many disciplines, it is especially appropriate in the research at hand that focuses on education and the challenges faced by Black students. Researchers using the anti-deficit framework should deliberately attempt to discover how Black students have managed to achieve and not why Black students do not experience academic success. Many theories have been developed explaining the achievement gap between Black students and their peers. Specifically, for the purposes of this research, Critical Race Theory (CRT), the Pygmalion/Rosenthal Effect, and Racial Congruence (peer to peer and peer to

teacher) will be used to explore the context in which Black students achieve academic success. Harper (2010) states that each theory can be explored in an “instead-of fashion” (p. 68). The following section will define each theory with that intent.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education

Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1976; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Chapman, 2013; Jay, 2003; Leonardo, 2013; Su, 2007; Taylor, 1998) in education is a framework that enables researchers to analyze inequalities in education through a racially conscious lens, so solutions can be developed to eliminate challenges and barriers faced by Black students. The approach is centered around the deficits in education as experienced by Black students. The anti-deficit approach to Critical Race Theory recognizes and “empowers” (Harper, 2010, p. 71) Black students as experts on their own experiences and gives them the opportunities to provide counter narratives about their successes.

The Pygmalion/Rosenthal Effect and Black Students

The Pygmalion or Rosenthal Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Bell, 1976) theorizes that students perform the way that they do in large part due to what their teachers believe they can achieve. Students tend to internalize what others believe about them and then live up or down to those expectations or beliefs. The anti-deficit approach to this theory would examine ways that Black students may have been able to overcome challenges or remain positive in the face of difficulty, doubt, and discouragement or lack of encouragement from their teachers. The similar nature between the Rosenthal Effect and Racial Congruence is why they are being connected for this study.

Racial Congruence (Peer to Peer/Peer to Teacher)

Racial Congruence (Oates, 2003) is explored here in two categories: teacher to student and peer to peer. Racial congruence between teacher and student has been found to be a significant element in student success. Oates (2003) conducted research discussing evidence of “anti-black bias” (p. 520) among white teachers and the negative impact this bias had on Black student academic performance as demonstrated on standardized test scores. This theory is also relevant in the discussion of Implicit Bias and how its effects contribute to the educational experience of Black students. The anti-deficit approach would explore how academically successful Black students circumvent these challenges and achieve their academic goals in this climate.

The peer to peer element of Racial Congruence ties into a discussion about present day segregation, referred to earlier as de facto segregation or racially homogeneous settings. Research by Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2011), Eaton (2010), DeConto (2011), and Rothstein (2019) presents compelling data for the benefits of true integration (neighborhoods, schools, and classrooms) for all students. The reality, however, is that most Black students are attending schools that are segregated by consequence or de facto. Their peers look like them and along with the solidarity and support and cultural experiences gained in these settings, being in these settings is the result of other factors which has a direct effect on the quality of their education. The anti-deficit approach to this particular theory may be to learn how the experiences of Black students in this population aid them in persevering towards their goals (see Figure 2). As with the anti-deficit approach to several other theories, the Black student is the authority on his/her experience and their counter-narrative provides insight into how policy can be used to reinforce the positive aspects of the Black student’s experience.

Together, Critical Race Theory (CRT), the Rosenthal/Pygmalion Effect, and Racial Congruence highlight and can categorize many of the elements presented as challenges to Black American students (see Figure 1). CRT addresses the foundational traces of racism remaining in the education system, the process through which resources are distributed, and the standard American curriculum being disseminated in classrooms. The Rosenthal/Pygmalion Effect works hand in hand with CRT because much of the placement and access of advanced courses can be left to the discretion of faculty and based on what teachers feel their students are capable of. Fiarman (2016) describes how implicit or unconscious bias tests reveal that a large percentage of people favor the group they are a part of or what is considered the “culturally valued group,” (p. 11). The article goes on to suggest that White educators who do not seek to understand internalized biases “risk perpetuating inequality,” (Fiarman, 2016, p. 11). Rubie-Davies (2010) and Baer et. al. (2010) discuss expectation bias at length in their studies and the impact that a teacher can have on a student’s future. Brookfield (2014) admits to “not challenging students of color” and acknowledges how an “embedded racist consciousness” is a disservice to Black students despite his and other White teachers’ desire/intent to be an ally (p. 91). Beliefs about a student’s ability can vary based on who is available to make the determination.

Consequently, the impact of Racial Congruence naturally emerges as a factor when implicit biases come into play. Many teachers have demonstrated a tendency to show favor for certain students and comparatively, Black teachers and faculty work harder to create opportunities for Black students, and Black students appear to demonstrate positive gains when their teachers are Black. How, where, and if these factors work together to produce Black students who are academically successful is a question this research endeavors to answer.

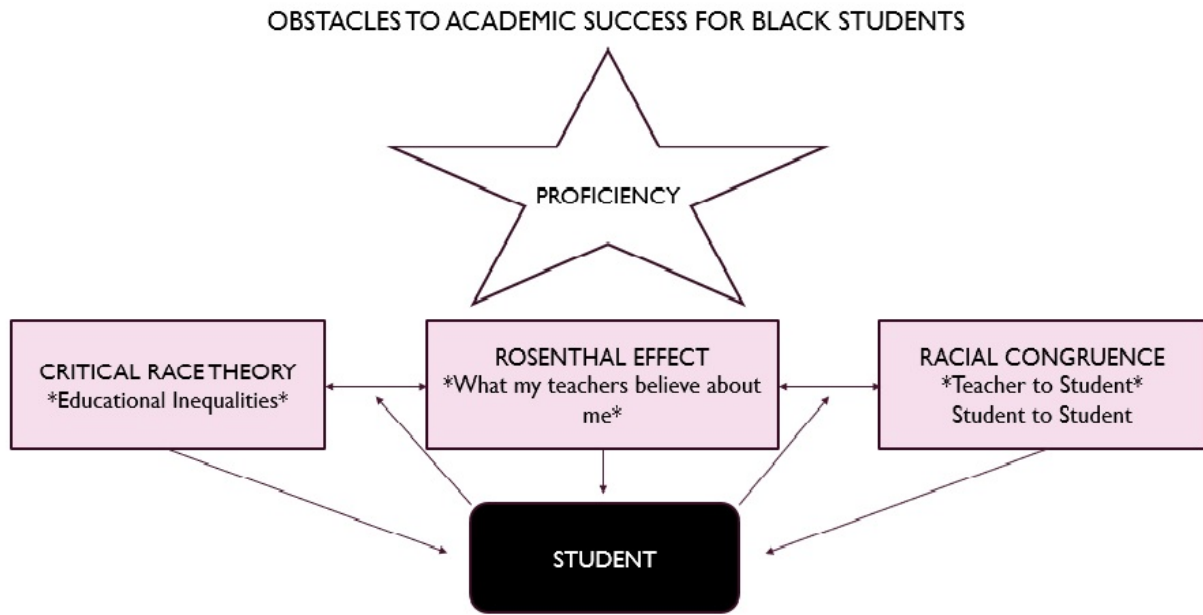


Figure 1 – Illustrates barriers to student success.

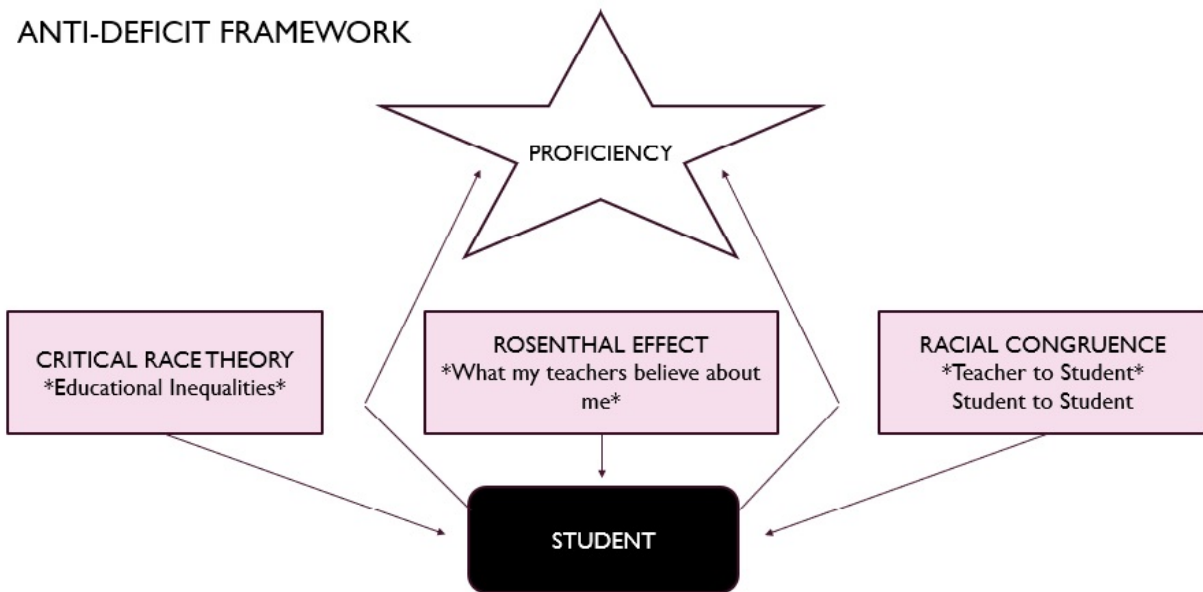


Figure 2 – Illustrates student’s navigation of barriers to achieve proficiency.

It is the contention of this research that Critical Race Theory, the Rosenthal Effect, and Racial Congruence are foundational to understanding the experiences of Black students in American schools. In some way, most of the factors found to hinder Black academic success are connected to these theories. The institutional racism highlighted in CRT is reinforced or resisted by the Rosenthal Effect which can be directly influenced through Racial Congruence. The data collected in this study will seek to uncover how Black students navigate the obstacles present in their public-school educations and find success. The following Literature Review will lay the groundwork and provide the justification for the study.

Review of Relevant Literature

Existing literature tells a story about the history of American education for Black students, highlighting some of the elements that influenced the quality of education Black students received. Many of these factors continue to impact the Black public-school experience; therefore, recounting these events helps us understand the current state of education for Black children. The previous sections provided a brief overview of the impetus for *Brown v. Board* and its immediate effects on the Black community and its children. This chapter will further explore in detail the implications of *Brown v. Board* for Black students with a review of its impact on the Black community, then highlight some of the issues that have persisted in the education of Black students to date.

A Historical Review of the Consequences of *Brown v. Board*

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 made segregation of public facilities constitutional in the United States, as long as they were equal in quality. The phrase and concept of “separate but equal,” established by the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision did not account for those in charge of the oversight of this judgment who may be more concerned with the “separate” than

the “equal”. The facts were that Colored schools (as they were referred to at that time) were inferior; their materials were outdated, the facilities were below standard, and funding was not distributed in a way that could be considered equitable. An NAACP brief stated that segregated schools generated feelings of inferiority in Black children (Fairclough, 2006) and as a result, the NAACP’s goals shifted from equalization to integration. Advocates for true equality knew that White schools were superior in a myriad of ways and insisted that their children have access to those schools. Fifty-eight years after *Plessy*, the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision case confirmed quite decisively that separate can never be equal and that segregation was harmful and unconstitutional even if separate schools somehow managed to attain equality. The success of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was considered a moment of great triumph to many in the African American community and their supporters. With the passing of this legislation, segregated schools were no longer constitutional. It was acknowledged on a federal level that the concept of “separate but equal” did not work in the best interest of Black children.

Those in favor of an end to segregation won this battle, but there were some individuals - both White and Black - who were against integration. *Brown* led to mixed results for the Black community and those against desegregation demonstrated this through both subtle and outright resistance. The newly integrated schools did not include the integration of Black teachers and staff in their interpretation of the law, and the NAACP knew that the end of segregation would threaten leadership patterns and economic arrangements (Fairclough, 2006). Stewart (2015) and Fairclough (2009) describe in depth how during integration efforts, White schools absorbed Black children but failed to hire Black teachers and administrators. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision focused on the students but failed to address the integration of faculty which

led to a loss of support, community, and reinforcement in the classroom. Once they had integration, many Black southerners ended their support of it, in some places petitioning to get their schools, teachers, and principals back (Fairclough 2009). “At a regional meeting in 1965, Black educators and civil rights leaders drew the obvious conclusion. ‘Negro teachers... could hardly be expected to push hard for integration knowing that they would be depriving a colleague of a position for every 30 students who could be persuaded to transfer,’” (Fairclough 2009, p. 401). Fairclough (2009) also describes how some Black teachers attempted to persuade their students not to transfer, and though their actions can be debated, their fears were not unfounded. Fairclough (2009) cites data showing the dramatic decrease of the percentage of administrators of color in several states: from 142 Black principals in 1963 to 48 in 1972 in South Carolina, North Carolina 226 to 15, Virginia 107 to 16, and Florida 102 to 14, just to name a few (p. 402). Many Black children were being sent to schools, some hostile environments, without access to the support of an adult from their own communities in their classrooms. The different branches of the NAACP were now conflicted in their goals: some abandoning their efforts for integration and fighting on behalf of displaced faculty and administration of color and others unwilling to sacrifice their fight for integration for the discomfort of lost positions or sentimentality of lost schools (Fairclough 2009). The fact was that *Brown v. Board* was never a fight solely about education or even a question of whether Black students were obtaining a quality education; many of them were. *Brown v. Board* was a social and political decision pursued on principle for the progression of the Black race. Unfortunately, in many ways, Black children suffered as a result of this decision.

Fairclough (2006) highlights numerous studies that lament the loss of African American schools and questions whether integration has destroyed something valuable to African

Americans. Studies suggest that student-teacher relationships deteriorated after integration and that many Black students lost interest in learning. Theories such as the Rosenthal/Pygmalion Effect and Racial Congruence confirm this.

Over the years, other researchers have questioned the good accomplished by *Brown* due to the impact on Black children and their communities. Jackson (2007) questions whether the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was necessary at all, pointing out that quality desegregated education has never been a reality for African Americans and inviting readers to consider whether *Brown* should be credited with the decline of African American communities. Richardson/Harris (2004) went as far as to describe desegregation efforts as “lackluster” (p. 367) and lamented “a loss of Black education, thwarted opportunities for Black children attributable to dominant cultural practices, decreased control over the socialization of children leaving them less prepared for the inequities they face, and diminish(ing) Black parent involvement in schools” (p. 367). They go on to state that Black children “lost opportunities for development and mentorship, judged by standards conceived and implemented outside of their cultural and ethnic communities” (Richardson/Harris 2004, p. 368). Resistance to *Brown* led to the *Green v. County School Board* decision of 1968 and the federal government stepped in to enforce desegregation orders (Rosiek 2019). Over time, however, the issues that accompanied integration shifted along with new White House administrations. Whether or not the problems would have eventually corrected themselves is a question that remains unanswered due to the election of President Richard Nixon.

Soon after Richard Nixon was elected to office in 1968, he ordered the Judicial Department to decrease rulings for desegregation enforcement; the momentum diminished, and desegregation peaked by 1980 (Rosiek 2019). According to Rosiek (2019), another ruling in

1992, *Freeman v. Pitts*, made it easy to lift desegregation orders and more than half have been reversed. These reversals many times led to even greater segregation and in some ways schools are even more segregated now than they were in 1968 (Rosiek, 2019). Even schools that appear diverse on their surface, have embraced segregation on the classroom level through tactics like tracking and selective enrollment in special courses (Nazargan, 2018; Pellegrino, 2013; Russo, 2004). Even though it appears on the surface that these students are where the resources are, there remain elements that prevent their access to a challenging and rewarding education.

Similar to times before schools were ever integrated, Black students continue to miss out on the bulk of educational resources along with other disadvantages. Data shows that Black children in racially homogeneous schools perform worse than their White counterparts: their standardized tests are lower, their graduation rates are lower, and college attendance is lower (Rosiek 2019). In addition, Rosiek and Kinslow (2016) discovered in a 10-year field study that students interpreted their “racial isolation and relative lack of resources as the community’s low regard for them” (p. 10-11). DeConto (2011) cited a U.S. Department of Education national report that stated that “in 2009-2010, inexperienced teachers were twice as likely to work in mostly African American schools as in mostly White schools” (p. 31). Rosiek (2019) cites reports that found that White students take Advanced Placement courses at twice the rate of Black students, and “the relative rate of White students taking International Baccalaureate (IB) courses was nearly three times that of Black students (p. 10), while Grissom, Rodriguez and Kern (2017) found that schools with more Black teachers or a Black principal had greater numbers of Black students in gifted programs. These disadvantages lend their effects to the data demonstrating that Black children perform comparatively worse than their White counterparts on

standardized tests, graduation rates, and college attendance (Rosiek 2019). The evidence here and detailed elsewhere point to the considerable impact of a diverse faculty on Black students.

The impact of a diverse faculty and administration in racially homogeneous schools on Black children cannot be understated. There is a considerable amount of existing and developing research on student-teacher race matching that is reminiscent of many emergent concerns of the Black community leading up to the *Brown v. Board* decision. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), Pringle (2010), Bell (1976), Burt (2013), Andrews and Gutwein (2017), Fairclough (2006), and Jones (2014) all provide research that supports that students perform better when taught by teachers who look like them. Black leaders and families worried over the loss of Black role models and support for their children inside of the classroom, and studies can perhaps be utilized to either justify or dismiss many of their fears.

Black students who participated in desegregation in the fifties and sixties felt the loss of their Black teachers and role models in their schools. Many Black students today are still impacted by the disparities of the lack of Black staffing in their schools. According to Cherng and Halpin (2016), less than 20% of teachers are racial/ethnic minorities which is a concern due to research that reveals minority students have more favorable perceptions of minority teachers (p. 407). In addition, Warren (2015) notes that the teachers are largely “white, middles to upper class and female” (over 80%) and argues that many of these teachers will not have had “prolonged, on-going interaction with people of color prior to teaching in predominately Black schools” and as a result they “are likely to have developed misinformed, deficit, social and cultural perspectives of racially diverse students,” (p. 573). These beliefs and behaviors can be detected by the students that they teach.

Ladson-Billings (1994) completed a comprehensive study describing how and why minority teachers may be more favorably perceived by students compared to their White counterparts, including their ability to relate to minority students. Cherng and Davis (2015) concluded that Latino and Black teachers are more “multiculturally aware than their White peers” which leads to improved classroom environments (p. 416). Cherng and Halpin (2016) find that all students, including White students, view minority teachers positively, suggesting that minority teachers “can translate their experiences and identities to form rapport with students who” are racially and ethnically different (p. 416). Egalite, Kisida & Winters (2015) compiled studies that strongly suggest that lower performing White, Black, and Asian/Pacific students in particular, benefit from racially congruent teachers. Quasi-experimental studies find that race matching between teachers and students is linked to higher teacher expectations and lower rates of student absenteeism and suspensions (Cherng and Halpin, 2016). Castro (2008) presents research demonstrating that teachers often hold cultural biases that can “spark racialized or cultural Pygmalion effects” in the classroom. Cherng and Halpin’s (2016) research shows that Black students “have particularly positive perceptions of Black teachers” which is consistent with Egalite, Kisida & Winter’s (2015) findings that Black students benefit from Black teachers. A quantitative study by Downer, et. al (2016) produced results that showed significant academic gains among Black children in 701 pre-k classrooms who were placed with teachers who were racially congruent.

The data gathered from the research points to the conclusion that Black teachers provide support, understanding, and encouragement that many Black children do not find throughout their educational experience. The research above also suggests that there is far too small a percentage of Black teachers in American public schools - less than 20% according to Cherng

and Halpin (2016), Karp (2015), and Warren (2015). This research hopes to uncover evidence of this data in the experiences of Black students who are academically successful. Until then, the question of whether the value of Racial Congruency overrides the benefits of diversity will be debated in the following section.

An Examination of the Value of Racially Diverse Schools

A case has been built here for the value of a welcoming environment for Black children and what that environment has looked like historically. Presumably, in a racially homogeneous environment, Black children are more likely to be comfortable. In a racially homogeneous environment with racially congruent teachers, they are more likely to be supported and challenged academically. The assumption is that a racially homogeneous environment will make an effort to teach from a culturally aware standpoint and reinforce a strong sense of self identity and pride. All of these assertions have been presented and supported by data. However, there is also an argument for the value of schools that are truly diverse and the proven academic gains for Black children.

While there are some racially homogeneous schools with Black students who demonstrate academic proficiency, there is also data that supports the suggestion that racially diverse schools may be the better choice for Black students. Jackson (2010) quoted Urban sociologist Pedro Noguera of New York University as saying, “Segregation is not in [students’] best interest” (p. 24). Both teachers and staff acknowledged that there were both benefits and losses (to segregation); children in segregated schools do not get the same exposure as they would in an integrated setting (Jackson, 2010, p. 24). By contrast, schools that are able to push for the goal of diversity, such as magnet schools, demonstrate great success for all demographics of students. According to Eaton (2010), magnet schools were started in the 1960s and expanded

in the 1980s as “voluntary desegregation measures” and operated by public schools (p. 31). Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2011) and Rotberg (2014) both note the significant success of magnet schools who remain faithful to their initial goal of diversity in creating high quality, integrated educational environments. Rothstein (2019) posits that “racial segregation exacerbates achievement gaps between Black and White children because it concentrates students with the most serious social and economic challenges in the same classrooms and schools” (p. 35), and this correlates with the potential and academic success of the children in those environments. Eaton (2010) discusses compelling data towards diversifying school demographics. The studies Eaton (2010) presented revealed that minority students attending diverse magnet schools made greater gains than students who did not. Not only that, but White students did as well. In addition, the achievement gap was smaller in magnet schools (Eaton 2010). According to Robert Brooks, executive director of Magnet Schools of America, “Magnet schools have a much longer record of success in terms of academic study and equity,” (p. 31). Eaton (2010) states that evidence shows that racially diverse schools are associated with achievement in math and reading for Black students, leading to “more advanced critical thinking skills, intellectual engagement, and a reduction in racial stereotyping” (p. 32). In addition, learning challenges can be overcome in desegregated schools (Eaton 2010). DeConto (2011), Banks (2008), Sparks (2015), and others mentioned here assert that segregation has an impact on learning. They refer to data from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that determines that low-income students attending more affluent schools scored almost two years ahead of low-income students in high-poverty schools (DeConto, 2011, p. 30). “Study after study,” stated David LaMotte, consultant on social justice with North Carolina council, “indicates that integration is key to excellence in education” (DeConto, 2011, p. 31).

Eaton (2010) cites the National Academy of Education: “In summary, the research evidence supports the conclusion that the overall academic and social efforts of increased racial diversity are likely to be positive. Racial diversity per se does not guarantee such positive outcomes, but it provides the necessary conditions under which other educational policies can facilitate improved academic achievement, improved intergroup relations, and positive long-term outcomes” (p. 32). Research indicates that race itself does not equate to a better education; however, the social and political implications of race continue to have an impact on the quality of education possible in specific contexts (Berrett, 2012; Grooms, 2015; Lee, Lam & Madyun, 2017; and Godsil, 2019).

The results of the research presented here work together to produce several possible conclusions about what impacts academic achievement for Black children. One could assert like some that Black children were better off segregated; they were educated by racially congruent teachers who were a part of their communities and served as role models, they went to schools where their cultures and contributions were celebrated, and they were more likely to return, and join the profession. In addition to this, there are examples of institutions where Black students thrived, such as the legacy of famed Dunbar High School opened in the late 1800s (Stewart, 2013). However, one could argue that the determining factor to success in these cases extended beyond racial congruence, especially in light of the factors that have been found to contribute to poor academic performance. An integrated setting with a curriculum that values diversity, has a representation of all students mirrored in a diverse staff, and provides and promotes emotional support and equity among its students demonstrates the same academic successes found in successful racially homogeneous settings. Clearly it is possible for a Black student to achieve academic success in both settings, even taking into account the research that demonstrates that success is more likely to occur in one setting over the other. What this present research seeks to

discover is what factors contribute to success in settings that are racially homogeneous and whether those factors contradict or contribute to existing research.

Ongoing Challenges for Black Students to Date

Many of the issues that existed when Brown was first enforced have only adapted to their social constructs over the past several decades. While the aforementioned hostilities directed toward Black children may have diminished and appear less obvious, the resistance has emerged with other faces and different tactics. The byproducts of integration included the immersion of Black children into a setting and education system that appeared to see no value in teaching a diverse, culturally aware curriculum. The National Education Association (NEA) stated that integration “produced the obliteration of Black identity” (Fairclough, 2009, p. 403). Toldson (2014) describes how racism is perpetuated most profoundly through the education system (p. 101) and points out how children are taught to revere historically racist people such as Columbus and Woodrow, leaving school with the belief that Blacks played a miniscule role in the development of the nation. Ogbu (2003) contended that schools and White teachers do not support African American learning and that some White teachers fail[ed] to “fully acknowledge the humanity of African American students” (p. 109). These students do not reach maximum potential due to the process of “schooling, whereby students are forced to learn skills without connecting them to broader social, political, and economic processes in society” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 110).

De La Mare (2014) provides examples of this phenomena in their exploration of Eurocentrism in social studies education, where it remains dominant despite claims of multiculturalism. These social studies textbooks present colonization efforts from Eurocentric perspectives by using positive terms like “Manifest Destiny” and “an exciting adventure” (De La

Mare, 2014, p. 138) while relegating the Black experience to chapters on “deviance, social problems, or race relations” in what De La Mare (2014) refers to as “curriculum ghettos” (p. 138). In these textbooks, De La Mare (2014) points out that “stereotypes are upheld, colonialism is legitimized, and Eurocentrism is normalized” and this “compartmentalization of knowledge disallows full multicultural engagement” (p. 139). Lynn’s (2006) stance is that education was “never intended to have liberatory consequences for African Americans” but that instead “schooling extended the arm of the slave master” allowing Whites to “continue to transmit Eurocentric values and morals to the oppressed” (p. 118). Lynn (2006) compared what happened in American schools to the process of “seasoning” slaves: “education/schooling in America continues the de-Africanization or acculturation process - forcing non-Europeans to accept European American culture as their own” (p. 118).

In 2015, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) conducted a study titled “Research into the state of African American History and Culture in K-12 Public Schools” which presented data demonstrating that although teachers may be eager or willing to cater to the needs of all students, those efforts have not been reflected in most states’ standards or classrooms. The report found that only two lessons, or eight percent, of total class time is devoted to Black History in U. S. History classrooms (King, 2017, p. 15). In addition, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s report “Teaching the Movement in 2014: The State of Civil Rights Education in the United States” noted that the majority of states received grades of D or F for their approach to teaching the civil rights movement, with five states completely neglecting the subject (King, 2017, p. 15). In short, Black children were immersed in a setting that neither celebrated or acknowledged their identity or the value of their culture and national contributions.

There are some instances where attempts have been made to address the eclipse of Black voices in favor of Eurocentric points of view, however many of these attempts have been documented as flawed or incomplete. According to King (2017), school districts in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia have requirements put in place to ensure that Black history classes are taught at all grade levels and Illinois is one of a few states that have passed laws that Black history be taught in public schools with special K-12 Black History oversight committees (p. 16). The Amistad Commission is a mandate in Illinois, New Jersey, and New York that emphasize “curricula that explains how the African slave trade and enslavement in the U. S. connect to the contemporary realities of African Americans” (King, 2017, p. 16). Despite this impressive accomplishment, however, citizens in Illinois and New York have complained that the mandates are in name only, “based on lack of curriculum enactment, enforcement, and financial assistance” (p. 16).

Some individuals (King, 2017; Watkins, 2010; Tocci, 2018) have published articles questioning why more educators and schools were not aware of the Commission and calling for it to be brought back. At some point, Illinois’ Amistad Commission did partner with the DuSable Museum in Chicago to develop a set of lesson plans to assist educators with the incorporation of Black History in the classroom; however, at the time of this research, those plans have been removed from the website. In addition to this, according to Illinois’ government website the Amistad Commission appears to be defunct as there is no evidence of there being any activity or active members beyond the Director. Only 3 out of the 15 appointed members of the commission appear to still have terms that have not yet expired.

As times have changed, direct expressions of racial preferences are no longer considered to be politically correct, however, the employment of tact does not equate to the extinction of

bias, especially concerning the experience of Black children in the school system. Wald (2014) explains how unconscious racial bias, which is directly connected to the academic performance of Black students, leads to far more frequent and harsh punishment for Black students. Steinburg and Lacoé (2017) and Gregory (2010), among others, have conducted extensive research demonstrating how the racial discipline gap influences racial patterns in achievement and that students who are removed from school (for disciplinary reasons) tend to have lower test scores, are less likely to pass, are more likely to repeat a grade and/or drop out of school, and are more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system (Steinburg and Lacoé, 2017, p. 11).

Wald (2014) cites results of the Implicit Association Test that showed that both White and Black test takers match Black faces more quickly than White ones with words representing violent and aggressive behaviors including those who denied as well as expressed explicit prejudices (p. 1).

Wald (2014) highlights clear evidence that children of color are punished more severely than White children for relatively minor, subjective offenses in school and cites research that illustrates how implicit bias or assumptions held by adults with decision making authority lead to harsher treatment of Blacks than Whites for similar behaviors (p. 2). Lindsay and Hart (2017) found that exposure to same race teachers was correlated to reduced rates of discipline for Black students. A Johns Hopkins University 2017 news release discussed the “role model effect” or the “race match effect” and the power of expectations on the way people invest in themselves. This release referenced another study by Papageorge et. al. (2016) that found that race places a big part in how teachers judge a student’s abilities and when a Black teacher and White teacher looked at the same Black student, the White teacher was about 40% less likely to predict the student would finish high school and that low expectations can affect the performance of students. According to Lynn (2006) and Bell (1976), the attitudes and/or beliefs of the teachers

can have an impact on students' group identity: that is "how the group sees themselves and how they are seen by others" (Lynn, 2006, p. 113). These perceptions can contribute to both a student's desire and ability to perform academically.

Lynn (2006), Richardson/Harris (2004), Bell (1976), Jones (2014), Taylor (1998), Fairclough (2006), Wald (2014), Fiarman (2016) and others have studied at length the connections between teacher perception and student performance. Gershenson, Holt and Papageorge (2015) found that non-Black teachers have much lower expectations of Black students than Black teachers and Rubie-Davis (2010) emphasizes what a great difference teacher expectations make when it comes to student learning and Ford et. al. (2018) describes how cultural congruence between students and educators has a positive effect on Black students being identified as gifted (p. 308). Boer et. Al. (2010) discusses expectation bias, and how expectations about future performance tend to come true which aligns with Pringle's (2010) research involving students confessing to underperforming when they knew their teachers had low expectations and being discouraged from pursuing academic challenges and opportunities when lacking encouragement from teachers and counselors (p. 38). Bell (1976) describes the Pygmalion Effect and how people can be influenced by those in power or leadership as well as how deficit thinking can lead educators to perceive African American students to be genetically disadvantaged and less capable than other students (Ford, Moore & Scott, 2011, p. 241). Brookfield (2014) personally describes "not challenging students of color" and explains how his "embedded racist consciousness" marked as empathy is in fact racist and a disservice to Black students despite his intent and desire to be an ally (p. 91). All of these issues - curriculum that is culturally insensitive and unaware, racial bias, and a lack of Black representatives in school faculty - are conditions of institutionalized racism and Critical Race Theory has been pivotal in

identifying and attempting to address how the education system fails the majority of Black children.

Bell (1976) is credited for Critical Race Theory (CRT) which explored the workings of institutionalized racism. “Bell (2004) argued that the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision disserved Black children by morally legitimating a school system that had not addressed underlying structural inequalities” (Rosiek, 2019, p.11). In light of what has been discussed here, Bell’s (2004) argument is enlightening. The research here has demonstrated how Black children were removed from their communities and prohibited from having any significant access to Black representatives inside of their classrooms. Even though decades have passed, Black teachers remain the minority represented in the classroom. In addition, Black students taught from a Eurocentric curriculum where the “voices and experiences of Black people have been silenced,” (King, 2017, p. 17) by White teachers may not have the opportunity to be immersed in a well-rounded, informed, diverse education that celebrates their culture and appreciates their contributions to society. Finally, Black students face unconscious and implicit racial bias which can have a direct effect on their academic performance. All of these factors together contribute to ongoing research that seeks to explain where and how Black students achieve academic success. In light of these elements that we know exist in schools, this research seeks the answer to the question of how Black students circumvent these obstacles and succeed in spite of them. Stakeholders can benefit from knowing what the existing factors are for Black students who achieve academic proficiency.

Considering all the challenges, obstacles, controversies and pushback experienced by these students, their resilience and perseverance must be acknowledged here. The reality is that this demographic is largely starting the race from a place of disadvantage dating back to their roots

on American soil. Dr. Terrence Roberts, one of the Little Rock Nine, shared his classmates' and his experience in a country with long history of racial oppression, "We had learned that just to survive, we needed to understand the dynamics swirling around us and we needed to grow up very quickly. We needed to grow up intellectually and emotionally" (p. 81).

Resilience, a means of finding a way to overcome adversity or challenges, is a term that comes up frequently in the research discussing Black American students (Clauss-Ehlers and Parham, 2015; Carter-Andrews, 2012; Irvin, 2012; Williams and Portman, 2014; and Marsh et. al, 2012). Black students have had more challenges to contend with and overcome, but they have met these elements with resiliency and the support of a community invested in their success.

Chapter Summary: Gaps in the Literature

There are some common themes running throughout the literature presented in this review. The concept of racially homogeneous schools which are in many cases the result of de jure segregation can be considered unjust due to the enduring effects on those involved in it; the research presented here demonstrates that it harms the segregator and segregated. Children of all races suffer from the loss of social, academic, and mental enrichment made possible by diverse interactions. The segregated suffer psychologically by the distance or rejection experienced throughout the process of being separated: actively distanced from others and the recipient of inferior materials, services, and engagement by those who do not or will not consider them capable of success. De facto segregation does not differ much from de jure segregation regarding its impact on children. All students still suffer when they do not have the opportunity to interact and learn from one another, and while some segregation occurs under the guise of school choice, in many instances the existing conditions, interactions, and perceptions remain much the same as involuntary segregation. Teachers and administrators are still capable of

having implicit biases. The bulk of the resources still follow students who look a certain way and live in certain neighborhoods. Those students and their families still have a tendency to vacate areas that attempt to integrate.

Racially homogeneous schools do have their strong points, and there are many good ones that exist. Jones (2014), provides examples of how an African American school has more freedom to teach curriculums designed to counteract the negative effects of institutionalized racism. Bass (2010) and Jackson (2010) provide examples of settings designed for specific groups of students who do in fact thrive and there are doubtless, many more examples. There are largely segregated schools where Black children are either the minority or the majority and some of those students experience success. Some Black students matriculate through the public-school system and never have a teacher who looks like them, yet they do well. In every possible circumstance, there have been, are, and will be Black students who do well. What seems to be missing in the research is what those students and their situations have in common. What are some common factors across neighborhoods, classrooms, and families that produce some of the highest performing Black students?

Chapter 3

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discover the ways in which Black students overcome barriers and become academic successful. In this study, academic success is demonstrated through the quality of their schoolwork, enrollment in honors and advanced placement courses, grades, and/or standardized test scores. The study will attempt to uncover and define common conditions among Black students who will be identified as academically successful. The findings will then be used in an attempt to explain conditions that lead to academic success for Black students.

This study seeks to analyze the personal experiences of Black students who have been identified as academically successful by their school administration using qualifiers such as grade point average, standardized test performance, and enrollment and performance in honors and advanced placement courses. This qualitative study will be conducted through an anti-deficit lens to discover common factors experienced by Black students who are academically successful. The research empowers Black students, makes them experts on their own experiences and gives them space to provide counter-narratives about their successes, namely, how they were/are able to overcome academic challenges, remain positive, and achieve their goals (Harper, 2010). The study is guided by the following question:

- What conditions impact Black students' ability to be academically successful?

Research Design

A grounded theory methodology was chosen because the purpose of the study is to understand what conditions impact Black students' ability to be academically successful and the process by which they adapt to or overcome their barriers. According to Creswell (2011),

grounded theory may be used when studying a process; it “provides a better explanation than a theory borrowed because it fits the situation, actually works in practice, and may represent all of the complexities actually found in the process” (p. 423). The grounded theory in this study will reflect the developmental experiences of Black students that directly or indirectly led to a positive or successful academic performance.

Research population and setting.

Creswell (2011) states that in qualitative research, the researcher selects people or sites that will lead to an understanding of the central phenomenon most effectively (p. 206). The central phenomena in this study is academic success. My sample size is small: 6 students. A small number of participants is an expected norm in qualitative research and enables the researcher to obtain a deep understanding of the participant’s experience and create a descriptive explanation of the experience (Creswell, 20011; Merriam, 2009). I then used homogeneous sampling to recruit students who have been identified as successful based on their grades, enrollment in honors and advanced placement courses, and/or standardized test scores.

Participants. From the pool of possible participants, I extended the invitation for 6 Black students who were identified as academically successful by their school administration using the qualifiers supplied by the study. I interviewed an equal number of males and females from 3 south suburban high schools ranging from 10th - 12th grade. Students were given the choice to choose or be assigned pseudonyms.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher recruited a voluntary sample of Black students who were identified as academically successful by their school administration. The administration at each school was provided with an overview of the study along with the appropriate forms and then offered their

suggestions and assistance in facilitating the recruitment of the students needed for the research.

The qualifiers of the study included students who perform at or above grade level as demonstrated through their grades, grade point averages, honors and advanced placement course enrollment, and/standardized test scores.

School administrators facilitated the dissemination of information regarding this study and established contact with parents and volunteers for this study. Initially, this study included a preliminary survey that would be distributed to a larger portion of the student population in order to gather data that would help build a profile about the demographic under investigation. The Coronavirus pandemic made it necessary to make adjustments to the study, which led to a simplified data collection. In retrospect, this change allowed for a deeper focus on the personal experience of each student which represents their voice more effectively.

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions and the state-imposed quarantine extending throughout the remainder of the school year, volunteer one-on-one interviews were conducted remotely at the convenience of the volunteers. Interviews were 20-30 minutes in length and took place with the knowledge and approval of school administrators and with written consent of guardian and student. Orientation took place prior to commencement of interviews to ensure informed consent procedures and adherence to the Core Principles of Research Ethics as defined by the Belmont Report (1979).

I used a qualitative research methodology which included interviews to gather information from students who are academically successful. The study relied heavily on

questions which explored demographic diversity, educational experiences in and outside of school settings, investment in education at home, access to racially congruent teachers and culturally sensitive curriculum and instruction (see Appendix A). Questions of demographics explored the extent to which a homogenous environment or lack of diversity impacted a student's ability to approach content from multiple perspectives and think critically on a global scale as suggested in research by Eaton (2010), Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2011), Rotberg (2014), and Rothstein (2019). Questions about a student's educational experiences in (access to advanced and/or challenging coursework, the Rosenthal Effect, and racial congruence) and out (time invested in student's learning as a young child as well as attitudes about literacy and involvement in academic extracurricular activities and investment in future goals) of school settings may support findings in research regarding elements of student success.

Finally, questions probing into curriculum/unit topics, classes, and cultural experiences inside of school highlighted a degree of cultural relevance and sensitivity in the school system, supporting Critical Race Theory and its importance in Black students' education.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2011), the grounded theorist uses a procedure "involving the simultaneous and sequential collection and analysis of data" (p. 433). I employed the emerging design in my process of data collection; whereas, I immediately analyzed my data and use the results to inform decisions about what data to collect next (Creswell, 2011, p. 433). In my coding process, I analyzed my transcripts and memos while looking for patterns. I expected that certain themes would be presented that would align with current research, and I categorized them

under major topics such as Familial Support, Mentorship, and Academic/Supplemental Programs.

Early in the course of the interviews, similar themes presented themselves in the students' responses and in line with the grounded theory process, recurring words or phrases that could develop a pattern were documented via memo. During transcription, further notes were taken which helped to reinforce possible themes. Once all six interviews had been transcribed, they were reviewed and progressively coded again.

In the first cycle of coding, the data was "lumped and coded" In Vivo. In Vivo coding was most appropriate with this work because as noted by Saldana (2016), the voices of adolescents are "often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult's understanding of their cultures and worldviews" (p. 106). Lumping simply refers to using entire phrases or sections as appropriate, as opposed to "splitting" where the text is coded line by line (Spaldano, 2016). For the sake of maintaining context and complete thought, lumping was the most appropriate form of coding.

Once the process of In Vivo coding was completed, the data was organized by developing Concept Codes. Concept Codes "assign meso or macro levels of meaning to data or to data analytic work in progress. A concept is a word or a short phrase that symbolically represents a suggested meaning broader than a single item or action - a 'bigger picture' beyond the tangible or apparent" (Saldana, 2016, p. 119). Organizing the codes found during the first round of analysis helped to put labels and ideas around some of the most common responses and beliefs of the students.

To help with visualization of patterns and concepts that recurred the most, colored charts were created that showed tick marks any time a student made a comment that reflected a certain belief, practice, or experience (see Appendix B).

While I expected that students' responses to the interview questions would confirm the theories already highlighted here in this research (racial congruence, the Rosenthal effect, and Critical Race Theory), I also hoped to find emerging patterns among the responses that would explain some ways that Black students navigate the difficulties present in the current educational system. As these patterns came forward, I coded this data as well and created new categories which enhanced various themes. This constant comparative data analysis allowed me as the researcher to stay engaged with the data throughout the collection process, "sorting it into new categories" and "comparing new information with emerging categories" (Creswell, 2011, p. 433). The result confirmed some things that research had already presented and exposed areas for further exploration.

Validity/Reliability/Trustworthiness

The grounded theory design requires that the results of the study, ultimately the theory, be validated. The researcher does this by making sure the theoretical explanation makes sense to the participants and is accurate, as well as employing discrimination sampling: a process of checking data against categories (Creswell, 2011, p. 442). According to Creswell (2011), a high quality grounded theory includes a clear/explicit process, a theory at the conclusion of the study that is grounded in the view of the participants, a link between the data and the ultimate theory, evidence of memoing and sampling that enables the generation of the theory, a visual model of the theory, and evidence of use of one of the grounded theory designs: systematic, emerging, or constructivist (p. 442).

Clarification of Researcher's Role/Power

As a researcher, I take an anti-deficit approach to the academic race gap. The anti-deficit theory defined by Harper (2010) approaches phenomena from the perspective of what has gone right, as opposed to what has gone wrong. Dwelling on the deficiencies in education is not a productive way to alleviate the issues. Within the anti-deficit framework, solutions are highlighted instead of consequences. Instead of focusing on the varied ways that opposition leads to failure, methods or conditions used to navigate said barriers are analyzed and promoted as a prescription for low and failing test scores and overall poor academic performance. The purpose of this research is to highlight methods or phenomena that may be able to be replicated to encourage an increase in achievement for more Black students.

Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2011) identifies grounded theory as a suitable research design for “sensitive topics” or “any research problem situation in which individuals need their privacy protected” (p. 440) due to its abstract process. The grounded theory process includes the full appraisal of individuals of the purpose of the study and guaranteed protection of the site and participants (Creswell, 2011, p. 440).

Questions relating to the personal educational experience of the participants are variables in this study. Interviewees were encouraged to speak candidly about what factors contributed to their educational experience, their personal views and feelings about classes, schools, or instructors past and present, time invested in educational pursuits at a young age and currently, and how much they connect with their course content. There were no questions designed to

obtain information about specific teachers, nor any other topics that may make the interviewee unwilling or uncomfortable about participation. The interviewee maintained full autonomy during the interaction and at any time could refrain from answering a specific question or exercise their right to withdraw from the research process.

Chapter 4

Results

The central question of this research is focused on discovering the processes of academically successful Black students who have and are attending schools and living in neighborhoods where the elements that contribute to the racial achievement gap exist and persist.

- What conditions impact Black students' ability to be academically successful?

While the students (perhaps unknowingly) identified some of the barriers that have been noted to impact the gap, they have demonstrated the ability to overcome those challenges and exhibit success in their schools and neighborhoods where many of their counterparts have not shown the same success.

The data collection process consisted of interviews conducted with six students over the course of a week. There were three females and three males, and each student was asked ten questions. Their responses were recorded and transcribed. The students ranged from tenth to twelfth grade and each student fits the description of academically successful as described by this study. The students represent three different schools located in the south suburban cities of Chicago which will be referred to as School A, School B, and School C. Each student will be referred to by a pseudonym.

School A is in the south suburbs of Chicago called Dolton. It has received the Illinois Report Card designation as a Commendable school. The Illinois Report Card defines a Commendable School as “a school that has no underperforming student groups, a graduation rate greater than 67 percent, and whose performance is not in the top 10 percent of schools statewide.” Ninety-seven percent of the students who attend School A are categorized as low-income students. Of the 1,089 students reported in 2018, 96.1% were identified as Black. It is

impossible to know the exact demographics of the school faculty: according to the Illinois Report Card website, 72% did not report their race. Similar results trended for the last two school years.

Table 1

School Profiles

School	Student Demographic	Teacher Demographic	Location	School Population	Illinois Report Card Designation
A	Black 96.1% Hispanic 3% White 0.4%	Black - 14% White - 11% NR* - 72%	Dolton	1089	Commendable
B	Black 83% Hispanic 12% White 1.7%	Black - 14% White - 11% NR* - 72%	South Holland	1780	Commendable
C	Black 80% Hispanic 10% White 10%	Black - 2 White - 3 Pacific Islander - 1	South Holland	42	N/A

Note. This table provides a breakdown of the characteristics of each school attended by students interviewed in this study.

*Not Reported

School B is in the south suburbs of Chicago but is not a Chicago public school. This school has also received the Illinois Report Card designation of Commendable. Ninety-nine percent of the students who attend School B are categorized as low-income students. Of the 1,780 students enrolled in 2018, 83% were identified as Black, 12% were identified as Hispanic, and 1.7% were identified as White. The majority of the staff at School B did not report their race.

School C is a newer private school that officially opened in the south suburbs of Chicago in 2018. It is not a Chicago public school. School C is not currently listed with the Illinois Report Card but planned to be for the 2020-2021 school year. The school's meeting with the

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) was postponed due to the Covid-19 epidemic. Of School C's 42 students at the close of the 2019-2020 school year, 80% were African American, 10% were Hispanic, and 10% were Caucasian (these figures are approximate and provided by a school board member and founder). Fifty percent of these students are considered low-income.

The school's staff consisted of 3 Caucasian, 2 AA, and 1 Pacific Islander. This information was provided by a school board member and founder. The school was unable to report information to the Illinois Report Card due to the suspension of testing for the 2019-2020 school year.

School C is unique in that it is part of the Mastery Transcript Consortium - an organization that is moving high schools away from letter grades and towards Mastery.

Participants

While the students brought their own unique experiences to the interview process, their responses also reflected similar perspectives and ways in which they viewed their surroundings, interactions and future prospects. In this section, each student interview is reviewed in their own words along with my observations. Quotes are incorporated heavily here in the effort of allowing the students to tell their own stories. Analysis will occur in another section.

Table 2*Student Profiles*

Participants	School A	School B	School C
1. Angel – Senior	X		
2. Brian – Senior	X		
3. Candace – Junior		X	
4. Danielle – Sophomore			X
5. Eric – Sophomore			X
6. Frederick - Junior			X

Note. Student Descriptors are given here to provide further insight about students' unique environments and experiences.

Angel.

Angel was the first student to be interviewed. At the time of the interview, she was a senior at School A. Angel's experiences were somewhat unique because she reflected on her early school years as a "challenging child". Angel describes this era. "When I was younger, it started off a little rocky because I had a lot of health conditions, so it was difficult for my teachers I guess to teach me, and I could kinda see that." She reiterates her difficulty in school and connects her struggle with her health with her grades. When Angel's health improved, her behavior improved, and she began to see her education as "something to enjoy and not something to be burdened by." Her view of herself and her teachers shifted:

Now in high school, I see myself as an involved student in my school so most of my teachers I'm really familiar with them, and I'm really friendly with them and they have respect for me. But when I was younger, I definitely saw the difference in being the challenging child to deal with and being what teachers saw as 'the good kid'.

Angel places great importance on diversity, both in her thoughts about her education, her future, and socially. Her responses highlight the value she places on having a diverse curriculum, diverse teachers, and diverse peers. The lack of diversity in her academic experience influenced her post-secondary choices:

This [the impact of the diversity of her peers] is actually what drove me to attend the university I will be attending next fall. Ever since I was growing up, there's always been a majority of African American students. We all live next to each other, we're all in these small communities...I guess that is a good thing in a way. So, I feel like I need to be a little more diverse - especially in my approach to certain controversial topics in our world. So, I'm definitely going to a more diverse college so I'm able to meet new people and learn new things. I don't want to become a bigot, because of the culture that I'm around, because I'm around like-minded individuals.

When asked about the diversity of her teachers, Angel stated that she has always had her "fair share of Caucasian teachers," but highlights a high number of Black female teachers that had an influence on her, stating, "There is someone who looks like me teaching me how to get through life and all of that and the courses that we have." She goes on to reflect:

There was a substantially smaller amount of Black male teachers than there are Caucasian male teachers or any other race of teacher that I have had, and I think that may be one of the reasons why for the males and even for the female African American students, that may be one of the reasons why they [the Black male students] don't necessarily do as well because they don't have someone modeling it for them. I know for sure when I have my African American female teachers, it's easier for them to relate to us because they were once us and it's really difficult for a Caucasian male teacher to

appeal to an African American male student and it kind of sucks because they may try, but it's a matter of the culture unfortunately.

Angel identifies as a perfectionist and is sometimes worried about the future. Even though she describes herself as driven and she gets As, she stated that she doesn't feel like an A student. She seemed to vacillate between working herself with intensity and putting all her effort into helping her peers. "I become a little concerned, because I don't know if I should keep on with that educational drive or move on to something more personal within myself."

Angel was one of the participants who contributed the most information during the interview process. Overall, her responses were thorough and demonstrated an awareness of her situation and the implications of her experiences on her future. She also showed a keen interest in the current study, asking questions and initiating a discussion regarding the premise and its implications of the research following the conclusion of her interview.

Brian.

Brian was the second student to be interviewed and attended School A at the time of the interview. Brian grew up in classrooms with mostly Black classmates and teachers. His experience makes him appreciate diversity within his curriculum:

Mainly because although students are usually stuck in a certain atmosphere averagely, I would say - my experience, I can say that I was kinda in a certain environment most of my life, so having - in curriculum - a different cultural or ethnic background would prepare students for the future, wherever that may be. If that's college, if military, trade - because once you decide to continue in your life, you'll probably encounter people who aren't the same as you who don't think the same as you religion-wise, politically, or don't

even have the same background as you, but you kinda have to learn what things to do and not to do and how to conduct yourself in certain environments and cultural settings.

Like Angel, Brian appreciated having Black teachers. He explained that seeing people who had a “visible similar identity” connected with him and impacted the way he learned the curriculum. Brian described “that comfort of having someone that you kinda share and have that connection with,” and clarified that he also had relationships with his few White teachers, but that it was a “different connection”. He went on: “It would be a different way the classroom would be - a African American teacher vs. a White teacher at times depending on the teachers I’ve had.”

Brian explained that having “mostly Black or African American” peers encouraged him to learn more about his culture. He explained:

Academically, it has pushed me to learn more about my culture; just seeing the majority of people around me being Black, it kinda makes you want to know more than what you see around yourself...like I know this, but I know there is more I could learn about certain things, especially when it comes to like history or politics or things of that nature.

Brian also described his experience of being inspired by his peers and people in his community: “It’s more of a push because I see people who look like me and who have the same cultural background as me doing the same things and trying to meet a certain goal.”

Brian is unique in this group because he specifically cited meditation as a method of coping with school challenges. In addition to talking to people he can trust (his parents or a counselor) he shared that he spent a lot of time in self-reflection, a practice that led to the act of self-regulation,

I would have to sit with myself and think: like I have this issue and I know it's overwhelming, but I can't let this take over, I have to sit down and think about what I have to do. If that involves me sitting there, meditation, and I tried to avoid dwelling on the negative and try to find a way to avert myself from staying in that place.

During this practice, Brian was able to distance himself from the issue(s), allowing him to see them clearly and from different perspectives:

During that time usually what would happen is I would get an understanding of what was going on so I could talk to the right people about it. Once I talked to them about it, usually I would have time to myself to think about my options and move forward without going back and usually just kind of get rid of things that were not important at the time. So if I realized I was going out with friends way too much, I would pull myself from my friends a little bit to the point where we may not talk on the phone that much, or go to each other's house or hang out that much or limit the amount of time I would spend not doing anything and turn that time into something productive, so my mind could keep going and not overthinking things, so to keep myself from doubting myself, just keeping myself busy, meditation or music. That was key.

Brian views his academic decisions as strategic. He explained his plans to attend a four-year institution and to continue to graduate and law school. He describes his high school grades and activities as something to be scrutinized and says that his academics will be attached to his career in politics and the law. Not only does Brian expect his academics to be examined, but his friends and network of people as well. He seems to have spent a great deal of time thinking and planning for his future. Brian was one of only two students interviewed (another male: Frederick) who named a specific future profession/field.

Candace.

Candace was Interview 3, a junior at the time of her interview, and the only student who volunteered from School B. Candace made a direct connection between the diversity in schools and curriculums and quality of society:

With this society, we don't learn enough about each other, so we don't understand each other - especially what's going on now. I feel if people learned about other cultures, it would help us understand and feel each other's pain. And then we'll have better lawmakers and just better people.

Candace's teachers have not been diverse, but at different points in her life they have been either mostly White (in elementary school and high school) or mostly Black (in middle school). Candace describes the impact this has had on her:

Certain topics don't get touched on, but I feel like we should touch on them in school. Like police brutality, most of my [White] teachers don't really talk about it - they try to steer away from it. We don't really talk about how it feels to be Black in society like you would talk with a Black teacher, so it's like little conversations we should have in class, we don't talk about it. And when it comes to the Black History portion of the year, it's really cut small.

In contrast, Candace describes her peers as "pretty diverse": an "even mix" of African Americans, Latinx, and Caucasians. She reflects:

It [diverse classrooms] has helped me grow as a person, just knowing Latino history. We really get into their culture and their tradition. It's important because I don't know what they go through. I only hear what they talk about in the books or see on social media, so

to actually hear their perspective, it's impactful because now I get to see how they feel about everything compared to my own thoughts.

Candace was extremely proactive and independent when addressing academic struggles. Not only did she stay after school and seek out her parents for assistance, but she sought out people and activities that would motivate her. "I would stay after school for tutoring and TRIO. Joining activities kept me responsible because you can't play in a game if your grades aren't good." Candace takes on the bulk of her academic success and future herself:

I feel like my family is somewhat involved, but most of it is on my own. If I have an issue with my grade, I would be the one to address my teacher, I pick my schedule for classes, I do my own college research. But, if a teacher won't fix my grade, that's when my mom would step in. But other than that, I'm really on my own. I talk to my counselor about any concerns I have. I'm very independent when it comes to school.

Candace does not take school lightly when thinking about her future, "It impacts a lot. I don't have sports or anything else I can back up on. I don't have money I can fall on. It's just my grades and after school activities is all I have as far as going to college and going into my career. I just have school." Overall, Candace seemed to present a grim determination concerning her school experience and her prospects. Her statements demonstrated an understanding that her life and her outcomes were her own responsibility and she did not stop to waste time dwelling on who was at fault. She was conscious of shortcomings in her school setting and her own reality, but she also did what she considered necessary to accomplish what she needed to succeed.

Danielle.

At the time of the interview, Danielle (Interview 4) was a sophomore at School C. She is a first generation African American in her family and seemed to be the first student interviewed who had not spent much time thinking about diversity and how it may or may not impact her education. She suggests:

It would be nice if they could learn about other cultures, but it may not be as important since there's not enough - no, scratch that, scratch that. It would be important because the world is very diverse now. So, it can better them for the future to know how to deal with other people.

It may be important to note that Danielle is one of the students interviewed who has had the most experience with diversity. Being the daughter of Africans who immigrated to the United States, her own background is not the typical African American experience. Danielle stated that her middle school teachers were all African American, and though she doesn't believe "it really made that big of an impact," recalls talking about the Constitution in the eighth grade: "I remember my teacher, probably from her personal perspective, always encouraged us to vote because of all the suffering that other people have gone through just so we can vote, so that's probably something that I will remember." Danielle's high school teachers are more diverse now:

I don't really think it has much of an impact; it just gives me a different feel from middle school because they are more diverse, so it's just like - seeing different people more often now... now I see like all different cultures - well, not really. It's just African American, a few whites, and a few Africans, but I see differences than what I use to. It doesn't really impact me, but it's kinda exciting to look forward to new people.

Like many of the other students, Danielle describes herself as independent when it comes to her schoolwork. She describes her family as “not very involved”. Typically, Danielle avoids asking her mother for assistance because when she does, “it may not be the best explanation because she learned it in a different country, and they have a different curriculum from ours here.” Even though Danielle’s mother may not be able to assist her with her homework, Danielle does talk to her about her difficulties sometimes. In addition, Danielle would reach out to teachers for advice, or talk to fellow classmates who were also struggling so they could work it out together.

Danielle is not sure what she wants to do after she graduates, but she says she’s doing very well and states:

Going to the right college should be something I’m looking forward to. I’m not sure what career to do; my science teacher has told me several times I have a knack for science, even though I may not like it the most, I may pick some type of career that steers into the world of science and health and things like that.

Not having a general plan or being overly concerned with the future seemed to be a similarity among the younger students interviewed. It seemed apparent that Danielle had not previously spent a lot of time reflecting on the topics presented in the interview.

Eric.

Eric, Interview 5, was also a sophomore at School C at the time of his interview. Like the other students, he saw the value of including diversity and multiple perspectives in school curriculums:

I feel like it's good to know the history of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It's important because when we learn more about a person's history and where they come from, we have a better understanding of them: who and what they are. When they go through hard times, like racism, since you understand them, you can stand with them when they are going through those tough times.

Eric described the most diverse experience compared to the other students. His response to the question about the diversity of his teachers covered not only his high school experience, but encompassed all of his teachers, "Well for me, it's been very diverse. I've had Asian teachers; I've had a lot of Black teachers and some white teachers. It's very diverse. Pilipino, Black, White, Asian, very diverse for me. It hasn't really impacted me in any way, it's just a normal thing for me." While Eric didn't see his diverse teachers as being impactful, he had a different view of his diverse peers:

I learn a lot from all my diverse classmates - like Mexican, Chinese, Black, White, Pilipino. I've learned a lot from all of those ethnic groups- well, not a lot, but I've learned some from those ethnic groups. They've taught me their language, or things that they eat or what they do, so I've learned a little bit of their culture.

Eric received academic support from his best friend and some of his parents' friends. Like Brian and Candace, Eric describes being inspired to succeed by looking at the success of others, "Sometimes I would see people doing well, so I would push myself to do well as well. Sometimes when I'm watching TV, I would see accomplishments and it would inspire me to have accomplishments as well." Eric did not seem to thrive on independence as much as some of the other students. He made strong use of his resources right away by seeking out tutoring

and stopping by to see his teachers at the end of the day. He also described a more intense level of parental involvement: “They would drive me to keep studying every day for like two hours. Sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn’t. Sometimes I would get angry because I don’t want to study, but either way, they always push me to study.”

As to the future, while Eric demonstrates some knowledge that what he does in school now will impact his future in some way, he wasn’t specifically able to articulate what that impact would be, nor did he have everything planned out at that point.

Well, my success can help me because it impacts me, because that’s what helps me get into...I can’t really answer that question. I can’t think of an answer. It only matters what I do in certain classes: like math and English and a little bit of science. I don’t necessarily need to do well, but as a learning experience, it would help me. Like certain topics that I’m learning in those classes might help me later in my future.

Eric’s response, similar to Danielle’s, may have been a reflection of his youth and maturity. It seemed apparent that he had never been called upon to reflect on his education and the implications of his success. Doing well in school continued to be largely the result of extrinsic motivation - his parents pushing him to study and setting required daily study time somewhat removed some of his need to “want it” for himself.

Frederick.

Frederick also attended School C and was a Junior at the time of his interview. His answer to the first interview question about the importance of diversity in school curriculums was unanimous with the other five students. Frederick found it important for the teacher to “inform every student on their own history”. He went on to say:

It's important to know your history because you have more knowledge of the mistakes your ancestors made, what they had to go through, and it could encourage you to be like or not be like your ancestors. You get to see different sides of the story and if you see more sides of the same story, then it leads to a better understanding of what you're trying to understand.

Frederick is unique because he is the one student to have had his mother as a teacher during elementary school. Other than her and a Black male gym teacher, he stated that all his teachers throughout elementary school and middle school had been "white females". Frederick described his high school, which he attended along with Danielle and Eric, as "really" diverse. "We have Asians, Black, White, Hispanic...maybe. I'm not sure [if they're Hispanic]. But yeah, high school has definitely been more diverse. I've gotten along with all of my teachers no matter what their race was. No matter what they looked like."

Frederick also describes his teachers' ability to teach and the impact that has had on him. His examples were specific and personal:

Like, if you were one of the White females, and they've always had a well-off life, they may not know exactly how to teach a subject, like the Civil War or the slave trade - or just how to be considerate of other families who are not in a good financial state. Like they say you have to buy this for a science project, and they don't think that maybe that cost a little bit too much money that the student does not have; like, that's happened before.

Frederick describes his current classmates as being mostly Black. His best friend is the "only White girl in the class... and my other friend is Hispanic." School C is very small. While

Frederick describes the school as “getting more diverse,” there are only two classes in the school. Frederick explains that his middle school was more diverse and that he felt that everyone was treated as equals and that they all got along. He says that he felt “normal,” and goes on to describe how the experience taught him how to navigate conversations and relationships.

I know I would talk to some differently than I would talk to others. Sometimes I would have different conversations about how my mom was with different Black kids, but when they would talk about how they were disciplined as a child, I would stay out to the conversation for the most part. Or I would hold back a laugh because I know they are disciplined by being sent to the corner. So, conversations about family, like family life and I typically have different conversations depending on what the race was. It impacts me because I know what to say now when I’m with a different race. I wouldn’t say that I code switch, but I kinda know like trigger words that you’re not supposed to say if you’re in a predominately white school and that’s impacted me. I’d say that’s a positive impact because if I go into the workplace and I’m one of the only Black men, I know what not to say to my fellow coworkers to make them mad or uncomfortable.

Frederick, like the other interviewees, gave answers that identify him as independent and self-driven. He considered the experience of getting his books published in elementary and middle school as victories and gave several other examples of highlights throughout his academic career. The challenge that he did remember was during his first semester of high school: “I was a part of an online class and I was also doing NaNoWriMo, and I was really busy and we wouldn’t get any time in class where I could work on it - well, we had one period, but it was a really challenging time.” During challenging times, Frederick cites “ranting sessions” with friends and family as being most helpful. “Sometimes,” he said, “academic difficulty with

math and pre-calc and I would go to my teacher and ask them ‘what do you want from me? What do you mean by this?’”

While Frederick did say he has support from various sources, he emphasized being his own biggest motivator. “Definitely my teachers. Myself. The first person to tell me to get my act together is myself. My friends. My strongest voice is myself though.” As for his family:

They pay for my education and they bring me to school. I don’t really ask for their help for most of my homework or tests, or projects. Sometimes I forget to even tell them about some things that I need for class the next day, and I’ve kind of been like this for a while. And sometimes I’ll tell them some good news and they’re like, ‘I didn’t even know this was happening in the first place.’ They don’t help with assignments. I definitely drive myself.

Frederick already has a career path in mind and his experience with certain subjects in school cause him to evaluate whether he wants to continue to pursue it.

Sometimes, if I notice that a math or science concept is hard for me, I think, ‘Do I really want to be an engineer? Is this really that important?’ If I get down, or if I notice that something is difficult, I revert to, ‘Is this really something that I want to do for the rest of my life?’ After I just sit and figure it out, it’s usually, I usually say, ‘Yeah, this is going to be worth it in the long run. All I have to do is just keep working.’

Frederick was one of the more impressive youths that I interviewed. A twice published author before high school, he came to the discussion with an abundance of confidence and the accomplishments to support it. It was interesting to note that his one criticism with his current school was not the lack of time to work on actual schoolwork, but no time was provided for him

to spend on his outside projects. His full agenda leads one to quite understand how he may simply “forget” to inform his family of it all.

These students are all unique and bring their own personal experiences to one part of their identity as Black students. With that said, they do have some similarities. They all have an awareness that diversity is important to some extent, whether or not they have experienced a significant amount of it in their educational careers. They acknowledge and understand that being able to see issues/subjects from multiple perspectives enhances their education, communities, and/or society as a whole. All of the students have some form of a support system that has been implemented in a program of self-care or coping. They all demonstrate some degree of resilience and self-efficacy, which has seemed to be a major component to their academic success.

Chapter 5

Data Analysis

The questions asked were developed to tell a story about what Black academically successful students have done or experienced throughout their academic career and whether it is possible that those elements have contributed to their performance in any way. Many of the responses seem to confirm existing theories and findings, while other trends have presented themselves in a way that could pave the way for future studies. In this section, the students' responses will be presented to highlight the trends that have emerged. Table 3 presents the focus of each interview question in the order that they were asked. The questions aligned with previous research about racial congruence, the Rosenthal Effect, diversity in the classroom and curriculum, and Critical Race Theory, and were designed to attempt to understand the academic experience of the student.

Table 3

Interview question focus

Question Number	Interview Question's Focus
1	Importance of diversity within school curriculums
2	Examination of experienced diversity in current curriculum
3	Evaluation of quality teachers
4	Exposure to diverse teachers
5	Exposure to diverse classmates/peers
6	Highs and lows of academic career
7	Coping with academic struggles
8	Academic support
9	Family involvement
10	Expectations/Evaluation of long-term educational value

Note. Complete list of full Interview Questions located in Appendix B.

Examination of the students' responses reveals commonalities and trends among the values of all or the majority of the six students in the following categories: **the importance of diversity, being prepared for life during and after school, being able to empathize, understand, and connect with others, appreciation of history and self, and improvement of society.** The students **also shared several characteristics: a strong degree of independence/autonomy, only moderately involved family, strong reliance on school counselors as a support system, inspired by success of others, self-starters and problem solvers, self-care as common practice, confidence and self-regulatory practices.**

The trends and categories are explored below in further detail. In some cases, the responses to multiple questions provided data to develop one (or more) specific idea. Because of this, the analysis is not examined by question, but by concept. Here I provided details about what students had to say about certain topics to tell a story about common beliefs and experiences among this demographic.

Importance and Presence of Diversity in the Curriculum

Question 1 asked students whether they feel it is important for schools to try to provide diverse curriculums. Only Angel considered her school content to be “diverse” in nature, but she emphasized coverage that she described as “shallow” and “watered down.” Candace stated that most of the material that he has been exposed to has not been diverse, but when it is, it is “shallow”. The remaining four students stated that the material overall has not been diversified, and when it is, it is only in specific classes and/or their lessons or texts have gradually become more varied with age/grade level.

In response to Question 2, it is perhaps not surprising that all six students cited diversity as an important element of school curriculums. What is more important are the reasons behind why they see a diverse curriculum to be essential. All six students emphasized how diverse curriculums in school prepare them to interact and function in the world. Half of the students made comments suggesting that their educational experiences lead them to feeling/being limited: “we don’t learn enough about each other,” “we don’t understand each other, especially what’s going on now,” and one alluding to an interest in studying abroad stating that she and her peers barely received enough instruction in languages to “get by”. In discussion of how they needed to be prepared, four of the students used language hinting at how they viewed diverse curriculums as something they need to survive in society and in the future. Phrases like “get by,” learning how to “not be like your ancestors,” and “how to conduct yourself in certain environments” conveyed the students’ concerns about their place in society and how they should navigate within it. Another description of the language used by the students is feeling/being limited. Brian described growing up in racially homogeneous schools as being “stuck in a certain atmosphere”. He went on to state that he and his peers would “encounter people who aren’t the same and don’t think the same,” and that they would “kinda have to learn what things to do”.

Another strongly emphasized point between all six students is the importance of being able to acknowledge that people are different while valuing their history and culture. A curriculum that includes multiple perspectives would teach them how to understand and empathize with others. Most of the students agreed that “getting to see different sides of the story,” “feeling each other’s pain,” would give people a “better understanding” of others and encourage people to “stand with” others when they “go through hard times”. The students equated a diverse curriculum with an improved society with better people.

Characteristics of a Quality Teacher

The responses to the question of what makes a teacher a “good” seemed to fall under three main themes: **student connection, skilled delivery, and student engagement**. All but one of the students gave responses that communicated some **desire for authentic care/respect from their teachers**. These students used the terms/phrases “get to know us,” “dedication,” and “love me and my classmates”. Skilled delivery means that the teacher in question has mastered their subject and the phrase “know how to teach” was a recurring theme among five out of six students, along with the expectation that the material is or is made timely and relevant. Student engagement was extremely important to these students. They expressed the desire to be challenged, understood their need for differentiated instruction (even if they did not use the terminology) and expressed a strong dislike for “boring” lectures and “busy work”.

Exposure to Diverse Teachers

The question of whether having or not having diverse teachers was impactful to these students provided responses that did not necessarily match up with the explanations and stories told by them. Most of the students attended schools that were both mostly Caucasian or Black at some point in their lives. All but Danielle and Eric – both first generation African Americans - emphasized that in their experience, Caucasian teachers found it difficult to relate to their Black students and that they tend to avoid certain topics and minimize their cultural importance by neglecting events such as Black History month. Angel stated that it is “really difficult for a Caucasian male teacher to appeal to an African American male student” even though “they try”. She noted a marked lack of Black male teachers and equated this with a lack of role models for Black male students.

Other students mentioned that most of their Caucasian teachers don't really talk about "difficult topics," but "try to steer away from it." Candace stated that, "we don't talk about how it feels to be Black in society." Frederick explained that specifically "White females" have difficulty teaching certain topics. He stated that they, "may not know exactly how to teach a subject, like the Civil war or the slave trade." This student also described his experience with teachers who don't know "how to be considerate of families not in a good financial state," citing an example of a teacher who expected his family to purchase supplies for a science project without thinking "that maybe that costs a little bit too much money that the student does not have." It may be interesting to note that the two students who did not bring up the issue of Caucasian teachers relating to students have had very different experiences than the other four. One student has attended schools with all Black staff until high school, where the teachers are fairly diverse (Black, Caucasian, Pilipino, Asian, and African), and the other student has always attended schools with fully diverse staff.

The students describe their experience of having Black teachers as positive, making comments about having teachers that "look like me" who provide mentorship are a positive influence. They also describe the comfort of sharing a connection with their Black teachers, stating that it is "easier to relate". When they reflect on times/classes without the presence of Black teachers, a theme of Missing out seems to emerge they miss having the "comfort of having someone" that they "share that connection with". These students feel that school is the place for them to discuss difficult topics and are disappointed when their Caucasian teachers avoid these topics.

The two students with extensive experience in schools with a diverse group of teachers find it to be a positive experience: one stating that "it's kinda exciting to look forward to new

people,” and both expressing that they experience a lot of cultural exposure to other people. Ironically, both students initially answered that they do not think the diversity of their teachers is impactful. They also both gave responses that suggested that even with the benefits of their diverse backgrounds, they may be missing the benefit of learning about their own culture.

The Impact of Diversity in the Classroom

The students’ responses to the question about whether having diverse peers is impactful aligned with many of the themes that emerged from their answers about the importance of diverse curriculums. Similar trends present themselves: preparation, survival, understanding/empathy, and learning about others. In addition to these themes, appreciation of self, identity, culture and community, and inspiration by peers present themselves as matters to consider. Three of the four students who have not had significant experience with diverse teachers gave responses that expressed their desire and/or intent to seek out diverse settings in the future. They see going to school and working in diverse settings as a need. One student stated that she wants to meet new people and learn new things, and that she “wants to avoid becoming a bigot due to being surrounded by like-minded individuals.” She said, “I need to be a little more diverse.” Another student expressed that being around/in diverse groups of people is “important because I don’t know what they go through; I only hear what they talk about in the books or on social media.” Common across the responses is the acknowledgement that having diverse relationships results in learning multiple perspectives, empathy, language, and culture. The students view diversity as a positive and responses collectively imply that the experience impacts world views, approaches, and opinions.

Those students who have had the opposite experience, mostly attending racially homogenous schools or sitting in racially homogenous classrooms, express appreciation and

pride in self and community. One student stated that being around mostly Black peers pushed him to learn more about his culture. He also expressed that “seeing people who look like me doing the same things and trying to meet a certain goal” inspires him.

Finally, the themes of Preparation and Survival resurface here in some responses. Fear/Caution or Identity Repression may be new themes to consider. One student describes how he has “learned to navigate different settings”. He used the term “code switch” and explained how he’s learned to avoid certain conversations and recognize “trigger words”. He knows “what you’re not supposed to say if you’re in a predominately white school,” and cites this experience as positive because he is prepared for the future, “when I go into the workplace, and I’m the only Black man, I know what not to say to make them mad or uncomfortable.”

The Victories and Struggles of School

All the six students acknowledged some type of struggle with a subject in school at some time. Two students attributed their difficulties in school to social adjustment relating to the transition from middle school to high school, and health issues early in their academic career that led to poor grades. What is common among most of these students is a self confidence in their ability and intelligence as well as a personal drive or determination. The students made statements about “shifting mindsets,” acknowledged their ability to catch on quickly, stating, “I’m usually pretty sharp,” and even though a subject may be “very, very hard,” declare “I have to learn the lesson”.

It is not surprising that these students have experienced challenges academically; challenges are expected as they contribute to growth and skill development. What is interesting to note is the degree of confidence or self-efficacy and their resilience. None of the students ever seemed to consider or suggest that they were unable to understand the subject or grasp the

concept. It was always a matter of how to do it or even a consideration of if it was something they even wanted to do. The belief in their inherent ability, however, always seemed to be intact.

Coping with Academic Struggles

All the students have a strong support system: five of them use the phrase “support system” when referring to the individuals they turn to when facing difficulty at school. There are four main categories of resources for these students: a support system that consists of friends, family/parents, teachers, and counselors; accountability and collaborative groups such as the mutual support of peers and members of clubs/extracurricular activities; and all of the students demonstrate a large degree of independence, one stating that she “takes matters into my own hands and figure it out myself.” These students take the time to do self-reflection and problem analysis, they are self-motivated and determined, teach themselves when necessary, and engage in self-regulatory practices: eliminating distractions and decreasing time spent on the phone or with friends. Another interesting trend is that of self-care. Four of the students describe that they take the time to “meditate,” listen to music, vent to trusted individuals, or “find time to get out of [their] head”.

Non-Familial Motivation

Three of the students attend a smaller school that does not have a full-time counselor on staff. The other three students all spend a lot of time noting the extensive support and assistance provided by their school and program counselors. These counselors “push” them to keep going and provide guidance when the students need guidance or direction. Four of the students emphasized the impact of their peers/friends motivating them to do well. Three of these students state that they are inspired by the success of others – particularly those who looked like them.

In addition to school counselors, students mentioned support from an array of sources. The adult friends of parents provided support and encouragement. A pastor provided a listening ear even as they bonded over similar interests. The adults in extracurricular activities were also sources of support and guidance. No matter what these motivators looked like or where they were, each student had at least one who came to mind when asked this question.

Family involvement

Here again the independent streak appears for these students. They identify as independent, stating that they “don’t really ask for help” or “I’m really on my own”. The students don’t seem to view their parents or family as a viable source for academic assistance. Their parents’ involvement comes into play when there is a need for reinforcement or intervention with a teacher. Family involvement is also described as “they pay” and “they bring me to school”. Mothers are also cited as being willing to email teachers or call when a teacher will not “fix my grade”. Overall, the various reasons that parents are not more involved with the academic aspect has to do with parents who “didn’t really go to college,” received their formal education in a different country, or the student simply “forgot” to tell them and handled the issue on his own.

Educational Value and Future Goals

Overall, the students view their current performance in school as preparation for their future. What they do in high school specifically helps them plan and figure out what they want to do in the future. One student described their educational performance as her “key to success”. For some of these students, their education is the one thing that can help them accomplish their goals. The youngest two students didn’t have a concrete view of the future or their place in it.

And one seemed to grasp on to her success in high school as her only means of survival and escape.

The students who were nearing the conclusion of their high school careers seemed very decisive about the paths that they would take reaching their future goals. They had a clear understanding of what they needed (experience in diverse surroundings or a respectable network of friends and associates) and actively worked to achieve or prepare for these inevitabilities (participating as officers on the Student Board, distancing themselves from friends who were distractions, investing time and focus in school subjects that would support career choices). These students were very intentional about their day to day activities and choices.

Discussion and Recommendations

In many ways, the words of these students reaffirm much of what researchers already know about the school system and the impact of a biased system on Black children. While the purpose of this study is not to highlight the deficits, they are there and apparent - not only to the observant adults, but to the children who are living it. Franklin (2016) states that “children and young people understand (better than many adults) what they are up against (p. 394). Along with the analysis of how these few students have been able to resist falling prey to the barriers that have impeded many of their peers, I will provide space here to give voice to their specific experiences and challenges.

Empathy and Teachers Who are Afraid to Teach

The words of many of the students in this study echo the experiences documented in existing research. Waxman (2020) tells the story of a teen feeling lost as one of a few Black students in an honors class: “She felt as if Black perspectives were also in the minority and that her teacher were tiptoeing around hard race-related questions about history” (p. 15). This

statement is reminiscent of statements included here by Candace and Frederick. The reluctance or fear of teachers that is being perceived by Black students is a reality in many classrooms. Ohito (2016) describes this as a “pedagogy of discomfort” which is caused by a “tight but invisible hold that White supremacy maintains on teacher education” (p. 454). Ohito (2016) describes the broader issue that teacher education programs have struggled with for years, “how to adequately prepare these White preservice teachers to attend to students with cultural and racial identities that are different than their own” (p. 455). In a system where the percentage of Black students in classrooms is rising, but the percentage of White teachers remains stagnant, this is a relevant matter. Brown (2016) asserts that “these teachers [need] to feel some tension, some discomfort” (para 4). Ohito tells of a White preservice teacher who reflected, “If I avoid conflict, discomfort, dissonance, how will I engage in conflict in a way that results in meaningful and transformative learning experiences for the students?” (p. 461). This concern is not only valid, but the question should be considered carefully when determining requirements for preservice teachers (Santaro & Kennedy, 2016). This point is especially relevant as the students interviewed in this study were actively witnessing social uprisings and protests in their communities following the controversial death of a Black man at the hands of the police. Several of the students referenced the incident and their desire to discuss the current events in their classes but stated that these discussions were not welcome or allowed. Some of them were aware and stated that their teachers were uncomfortable addressing these topics.

The key to answering the question of how to engage in conflict in meaningful ways is a matter of assessing the level of emotional investment future teachers are willing to put into the experience. The students represented by this study want their teachers to care. Relationships with their teachers are important to them. It is doubtful whether meaningful relationships can

develop without some degree of empathy involved. According to Warren (2015) teacher empathy, or the application of empathy by classroom teachers, is “theorized as essential to the work of teachers in multicultural classroom settings. Scholars conclude that empathy is essential for raising academic outcomes and establishing productive student teacher relationships” (p. 155). Warren (2015) goes on to say that “empathy is believed to be one factor among others that separate excellent teachers from their less effective peers and is assumed to precede other important teaching traits such as caring, positivity, and commitment to others’ moral development” (p. 156). Several researchers link academic outcomes to how much teachers care or how much students perceive they care (Warren, 2015; Bottiani, 2016; Vega, Moore, Miranda, 2015). The students in this study told stories of teachers who cared and identified them as “good” teachers.

School Support Services (i.e. Counselors)

Preparing adults to be able to serve in supporting roles for students in the classroom is as important as ensuring that prepared adults are available to serve students in other capacities. Rust (2019) states that “applying the role of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) in specifically addressing the educational and psychosocial needs and concerns of urban African American students is of the utmost importance” (p. 1151). The importance of the school counselor is obvious in the related experiences of the students in this study. All of the students who had regular access to counselors on site utilized those counselors as resources for future planning, social challenges, and academic difficulty. In general, however, the actual ratio of school counselors to students “frequently exceeds the ratio of 250:1 recommended by the ASCA” (Williams & Portman, 2014, p. 40). Counselors are also given large amounts of administrative work, which would lead to students perceiving “school counselors as uninvolved

and busy with paperwork” (Williams & Portman, 2014, p. 40). In these cases, counselors are on staff, but essentially unavailable to provide the support needed by students.

Like Angel, Brian, and Candace - who had access to school counselors, the Black high school graduates in Vega, Moore, and Miranda’s (2015) research expressed that “supportive relationships with school officials were influential” (p. 39) and that these relationships caused them to feel “supported and included” (p. 39). Bottiani (2016) defines school support as an emerging construct theorized to fulfill student needs for belonging, competence, and autonomy (p. 1176). Rust (2010) cites Cummins (1986) in a description of “bicultural ambivalence” where “[Black] cultural roles, norms, and values are not reflected in their schools and how this may lead to “a lack of a sense of belonging or connection with ones’ school as well as lower academic achievement motivation” (p. 1151). In short, the presence and availability of school counselors may be a large part of what contributes to the overall academic success of Black students. It is not clear if all of the students in School A and B have/had the access to counseling enjoyed by the students in this study.

Self-Efficacy

During the interviews, I noted a degree of confidence in the responses of most of the students. These students used words to describe themselves and experiences such as “I catch on fast” and “I’m a quick learner,” and “I’ll figure it out myself”. Schunk & Meece (2006) define self-efficacy as “one’s perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels” (p. 72). According to Schunk & Meece (2006), a student’s self-efficacy is influenced by 3 factors: family, schooling, and peers and is hypothesized to affect “individual’s task choices, effort, persistence, and achievement (p. 73). In fact, compared with learners who doubt what they are capable of, “those who feel self efficacious about learning or performing a task

completely are apt to participate more readily, work harder, persist longer when they encounter difficulties, and achieve at higher levels” (p. 73), which describes fairly accurately the experiences related by the students in this study.

These students had in common the initiative to find a way to get it done, whatever “it” may have been. Some of these students approached their teachers, a couple formed study groups, while others took a moment to regroup and then sat down to “figure it out”. Two stated that they attended tutoring, but it was done as a choice and not through coercion. Even when frustrated, most of the students never stated that they considered giving up; it was always a matter of figuring out how to get it done.

The Value of Family Involvement

The degree to which family involvement is helpful according to the research may differ with what some may think of when they hear about “involved” parents. For instance, I was somewhat surprised when so many of the students I interviewed (all but Eric) described dynamics where their parents operated far in the background with what I interpreted as a “hands off” approach. The parents were mainly available to step in during extreme circumstances or to provide materials or financial support. Only one parent (Brian’s) regularly checked in with the student’s teachers and the youngest student’s (Eric) mandated home study hours. However, once the personal experience of the student(s) was taken into account in addition to the research, the concept of “involvement” vs. “support” began to evolve.

Earlier in this study, Danielle described how she avoids seeking out help from her mother who was educated in Africa. She explained that the education system is different there and her mother is unable to assist her when she comes against challenges. This is not an uncommon occurrence, whether the adult in the situation is an immigrant or not. Vega, Moore, and Miranda

(2015) published a study where the majority of participants reported that they did not seek help from others with their school work, “Some shared that their families were limited in ability to help due to limited education or low English language proficiency” (p. 45). Ironically, while Schunk and Meece (2006) outline many ways in which self-efficacy can be influenced or developed, they state that “adolescents benefit from home environments that encourage self-reliance and autonomy” (p. 89). In addition to this study, Bonner, Boyle, and Sadler (2016) find that “increased academic assistance through homework help and other more intrusive parenting techniques can compromise achievement” (p. 1061). This need to be independent may indirectly produce students who have higher degrees of self-efficacy.

How Friends and Peers Contribute to Success

Friends and peers were very relevant throughout the interviews with each student, even aside from the one question that focused on classmates. Peers were used as a resource and called upon to collaborate in the face of academic challenges, peers/friends were involved in a measure of self-care when it was time to “rant”, and diverse peers were a source of knowledge and preparation for life. Nearly all of the students interviewed echoed Lewis, Nishina & Hall (2018) in their assessment of the importance of diverse classmates: “cross-ethnic peer relationships can provide additional benefits to individuals over and above interactions with same ethnicity peers, such as providing new perspectives to incorporate into one’s sense of self” (p. 194). Many of the students stated that having diverse peers helped them to understand the world by teaching them to see issues from multiple perspectives. In addition to these insights, Lewis, Nishina and Hall (2018) stated that “Interactions with cross-ethnic individuals, particularly for ethnic minority adolescents is associated with increased academic achievement” (p. 194). Understanding topics

and events from multiple perspectives help to develop critical thinking skills, leading to improved academic performance.

Also relevant in this discussion is the influence peers can have on one another, not only socially, but academically. Brian and Eric described how they are inspired by seeing their peers and people who look like them accomplish great things. Candace explained how her peers in her extracurricular activities hold her accountable and have “big goals” which encourages her. Schunk and Meece (2015) explain that students who observe similar peers learn a task may also believe that they can learn it. They also report that more academically motivated students have larger peer networks and in a study that observed students with mixed abilities, “students affiliated with groups high in academic motivation changed positively” (Schunk & Meece, 2015, p. 83). Some of the students interviewed were strategic about the activities they participated in and the people they associated with.

Self-Determination and Academic Achievement

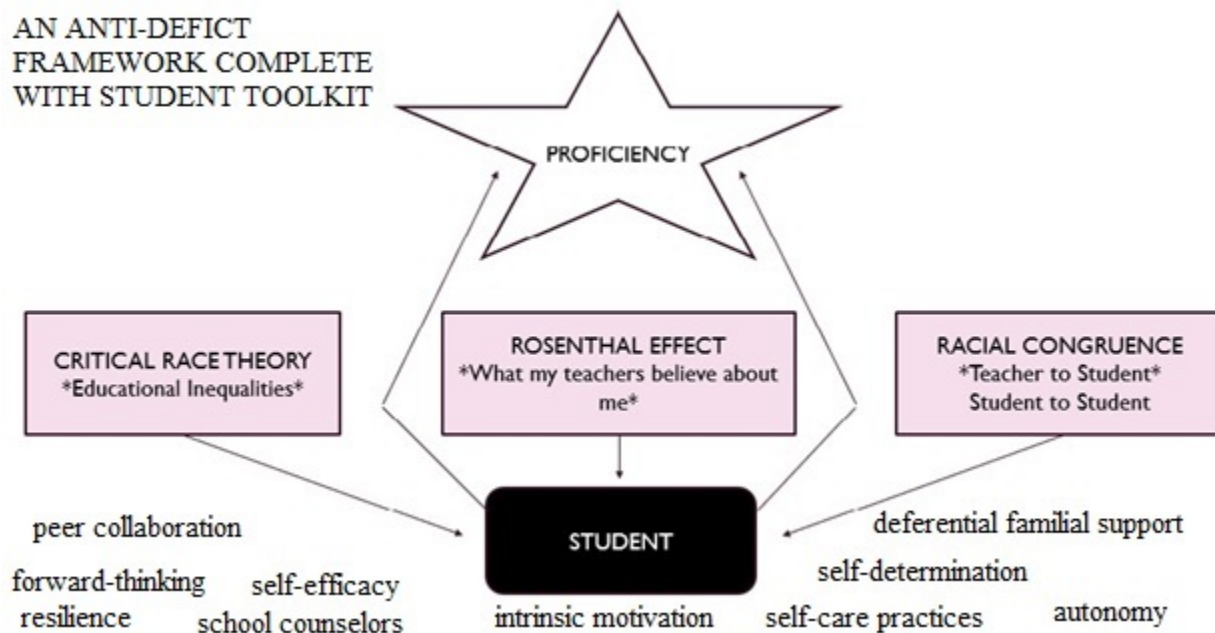
I end this portion of the discussion with this topic because the research suggests that all of the aforementioned topics (family, schooling - which includes relationships with adults, and peers) influence self-determination and academic achievement (Schunk & Meece, 2015). When a student feels like they have support and that they belong in their schools, they are more likely to be engaged. An engaged student is more motivated to learn, thus engagement is linked to academic achievement (Warrell, 2016). It makes sense that intrinsic motivation, or the enjoyment of learning, would be associated with high levels and characteristics of academic achievement, but Warrell (2016) adds another layer to the topic for consideration. Self-determination theory identifies intrinsic motivation as “the highest form of autonomous

motivation and [identifies] regulation - wherein one does not necessarily enjoy learning, but sees it as important” (p. 321) as another form of autonomous motivation.

Having both forms of self-determination validates both experiences for students who perform well academically. While I can confidently identify a few of the students that I interviewed as individuals who may enjoy learning for learning’s sake, there were also some who gave the impression that school was a duty to fulfill and achieving good grades was a task that had to be accomplished as a pathway to meeting other goals. Both forms of motivation are effective for the students in question.

The Student Toolkit and the Anti-Deficit Framework

The discussion preceding this section sets the stage to support the elements that students in this study have in their “toolkit” (see figure 3) to help them navigate the existing barriers in much of America’s public education system. The tools identified through the data collection in this research include the following: peer collaboration, deferential familial support, self-determination, forward thinking, self-efficacy, resilience, school counselors, intrinsic motivation, self-care practices, and autonomy. What is important to understand about any tool is that it must be made available and the appropriate tool must be utilized for the specific situation in order for it to do any good. What these students have in common is that they have the majority of these tools available to them and they have put them to use when necessary. In the following sections I will apply this supposition to the theories presented in the theoretical framework of this study: Critical Race Theory, Rosenthal Effect, and Racial Congruence.

Figure 3

Note. The graphic illustrates the student facing barriers to proficiency armed with items in their toolkit.

Critical Race Theory

All of the students interviewed have experienced the educational inequalities defined by Critical Race Theory (CRT) whether they recognized it and were able to articulate it or not. The deficits experienced in the students' classrooms were highlighted by their testimonies. Candace described the histories and novels that she has been exposed to in her English and History classes have been "one sided" and told from a "Caucasian perspective across the board". While all the students stated that at some point their classes covered Black history or read Black stories, most of them specified that these instances focused on slavery and the Civil Rights movement. Angel and Candace emphasized that the coverage was "shallow" or "watered down". Unfortunately, these experiences are reality for many Black children due to the discomfort or dissonance of

those who teach them. Some of the experiences described carry over to the second theory in the framework.

The Rosenthal (Pygmalion) Effect

The Rosenthal Effect has the central idea that a teacher's expectations have a significant influence on student performance (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Bell, 1976). The nature of this study makes it impossible to assess the beliefs of the teachers in question. All we can do is make some logical assumptions and conjectures based on the experiences communicated by the students in this study. While this section focuses on portions of the story that highlight the issue that exists for Black students, it seems reasonable to also point out that it is likely that their experiences are not linear. While they have likely had teachers who have doubted their abilities directly or indirectly, they have also had many positive experiences with their teachers.

Angel, Brian, Candace, and Frederick made statements about "comfort" in relation to their teachers; what they have been willing to teach and discuss or not and how that makes them feel. Frederick also highlighted insensitivities displayed by teachers who may not fully grasp their students' economic realities. Finally, all the students' language expressed a desire for their teachers to care about them enough to not only do a good job teaching but, in many cases, build relationships as well. What seems to stand out somewhat ironically considering this theory, is that students also have a strong sense of what their teachers are capable of.

Racial Congruence (Peer to Peer/Peer to Teacher)

The insight demonstrated by the students regarding the diversity of their peers was impressive. The research shows plainly that there are pros and cons to both diverse and racially homogeneous classrooms (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011; Eaton, 2010; DeConto, 2011; and Rothstein, 2019). The students interviewed in this study were able to recognize both

perspectives. There was definitely an appreciation for the comfort available in learning and playing with people with similar experiences and cultures, as expressed by Brian and Frederick and the ability to be inspired by people who look like them is powerful – but the importance of diversity was acknowledged by most of the students. Not only did five of the six students explain how much they have learned any time they were in position to have diverse peers, but Angel has actively planned her post-secondary pursuits with the intent of being immersed in diversity.

Teacher to student racial congruence is also a divided issue. The realities of implicit bias, as well as teachers who are simply too uncomfortable to create the learning experiences needed by Black children, are relevant to the discussion (Oates, 2003; Fiarman, 2016; Rubie-Davies, 2010; Baer et. al., 2010; Brookfield, 2014). The reality is, however, that two things can be true: racial congruence between teachers and students does have value and lead to significant gains- but so does a staff that is truly diverse. It is not so much that one race is better at teaching than another, but that, historically, White teachers have not collectively demonstrated the ability to empathize or teach Black students effectively. Until this changes, it becomes a necessity to fill more classrooms with Black teachers who Black students can trust, feel understood by, and look up to.

With this in mind, the students' responses reflect an appreciation of both realities regarding the diversity of their teachers. It is interesting to note that in many cases, they seem to define diversity as simply having a Black teacher. Angel, who actively seeks diversity says that her Black female teachers are a “positive influence” and that it’s “easier for them to relate”. She noted that there are more White males than Black male teachers, which she says makes it “difficult because [White male teachers] try [to relate to Black male students], but it’s a matter of

the culture.” She equated this to there being a “lack of role models” for Black students. The students who attend a school where the staff is truly diverse seem satisfied with their experience. They learn about people, cultures, and perspectives. When it comes to these students, it is important to note that their “diverse” staff includes Black teachers.

Anti-Deficit Applications

After confirming the existence of these academic barriers to the students in question, now we can address how they were able to excel in their environments. What were the tools and how did they use them? When teachers left Brian, Angel, Danielle, Eric, Frederick or Candace to figure out their schoolwork on their own, they used their self-efficacy to do so. If that proved ineffective, Angel, Danielle and Frederick would collaborate with their peers; Brian would demonstrate autonomy by eliminating distractions and distancing himself from his peers. Angel, Brian, and Candace would seek out their school counselors for assistance navigating their school experience: social and academic. Candace and Brian knew that their families were available and prepared to step in when needed. When overwhelmed with difficult situations, Brian, Danielle, and Frederick would implement self-care practices by taking time for themselves, ranting and/or crying with friends, or listening to music. These students have exhibited resilience and determination by persisting and/or finding ways to navigate challenges as they presented themselves. Some favor specific tools over others, but all of the students have all of the resources in their own toolkits.

Limitations and Future Considerations

This study did not ask the question or specifically attempt to assess how the students feel about school, as in do they enjoy it or are they happy there. This may or may not have had some significance in light of the research done by Warrell (2016) that links “enjoyment of learning”

with academic achievement. Some mention of the matter was mentioned due to the self-determination factor that provides an out; however, this would be an interesting angle for future studies.

Also not addressed in this study is the parental perspective. It is acknowledged by this researcher that adults are many times more capable of providing information – unobserved or unknown by the child – specific strategies, investments, etc. that have a significant influence on the way the child thinks and acts. The independence, or self-efficacy, demonstrated by most of the students could have been a characteristic that is the result of some form of conditioning-intentional or by circumstance. Study into how to create conditions conducive to academic independence could be informative.

Conclusion

The students in this study represent a small percentage of a demographic that, overall, trails behind in the race to the top. They attend, or have attended, the same schools that experience the challenges reported to contribute to the racial academic achievement gap. Somehow, they have managed to perform at the top of that gap. Whether or not they can fully articulate what the issues are, they demonstrate a full awareness of them, and in their own ways, they have developed methods of navigating the system. While this is commendable, public school administrators and institutions that train future teachers can make practical changes and adjustments to their programs to improve the overall experiences of Black students and make it easier for them to experience academic success. Some factors, such as the demographic diversity of a community, may be difficult or impossible to address immediately; however, actions can be taken to effect change.

The curriculums in use in public schools need to be revamped. Controversy has sparked in various states when students and their parents have identified and spoken up about inaccurate, white-washed, and/or Eurocentric versions of history, politics, and stories in textbooks and lessons. Efforts have been made to address the issue, but in some places – such as Illinois – these efforts have been short-lived and/or ineffective. While the Amistad Commission may be defunct in Illinois, this does not mean that nothing can be done. Teams can be developed at the district level to overhaul school curriculums and ensure that they are more inclusive, and students should be a part of the process. In addition to this, compensated trainings for teams made up of volunteer teachers with a demonstrated commitment and history of a practice of empathic diverse teaching should take place regularly. Additional funding would not be required if current resources are reallocated. There are local programs, such as the CARTER Center for K-12 Black History Education at the University of Missouri that focus on professional development for teachers in an effort to improve the educational experience of Black children; their yearly conferences include the participation of current and former students. School districts could also attempt partnerships with local university educational departments to create programs that truly prepare all teachers to educate all students with knowledge, empathy, and relationship. Teachers can also take the initiative to willingly go outside of their comfort zones and provide safe spaces in their classrooms where student identities are acknowledged, celebrated, and given opportunity to be heard. Teachers can also advocate for their students and themselves by letting it be known that curriculums, standards, and/or trainings are inadequate. Finally, teacher education programs should be audited to ensure that prospective teachers are being trained to be aware and sensitive to these issues that exist in schools everywhere. A course or two in African American, Hispanic, and Native American literature is not sufficient and does not prepare

individuals who have had not previous exposure to or experience with Black children. Learning how to be uncomfortable and how to create classrooms that are student-centered and not teacher centered is critical to fostering environments where every student can thrive.

Having a system of supports and community has been key for each of the students in this study. Those systems were nuanced, but their accessibility to each student was consistent. Parents, pastors, friends, peers, and friends of parents were all available when challenges presented themselves. This group of people was not there to help with homework or provide tutoring, but to offer emotional support and academic advice. The access to school counselors was a strong thread that established itself in each student's experience. It was clear from their stories and reinforced by the research that counselors who are available to support students is a critical need. It seems imperative that making this a reality be made a priority for public school administrators. Counselors should be plentiful and have the time and resources to develop the relationships that students crave which will go far in creating greater connections to school and community while improving academic performance.

The factor that seems to be the most critical in the ultimate goal of academic success is that of perseverance. These students are confident in their abilities and make significant efforts to do well. When they face challenges, they use the resources that they have: teachers, tutors, counselors, and each other. When those things don't work, they return to their own ingenuity and determination and eventually they work out problems on their own. This combination of self-efficacy and self-reliance contributed to the student's tendency to persevere. Some may characterize this as grit, but the point remains that at some point each of these students were given tools or shown how to utilize the tools they had in order to succeed. The grit doesn't work

if there is no substance with which to work. More effort and research can be implemented to train teachers how and when to develop these traits in students.

It is the intent that this research adds to the growing evidence of the value of student voice (Defur, 2009; Elwood, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Friend, 2012; Gunter, 2007; O'Neill & McMahon, 2012; and Posti-Ahoras & Lehtonski, 2014) and highlights that there is much we can learn from a demographic that it should be our goal to duplicate. It is this educator's experience that students whose voices and opinions are sought after and considered are more engaged and invested in their learning experience. These students defy the odds and have real time data that can be implemented in pre-service teacher training and school curriculums. It is my hope that the young people who participated in this study felt heard, that their voices mattered, and that their experiences are valued. It is also my hope that educators and administrations feel more informed about what students want and need in addition to having a desire to learn more from students about ways to improve the system for every child.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. In your opinion, is it important that schools make a concentrated effort to provide a diverse curriculum for their students (diverse meaning different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds)? Please explain why it is or is not important.
2. Reflect on the coursework you have experienced in your Social Studies, History, English, and Reading classes. Has the content consistently included perspectives from multiple ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds? Please explain.
3. What does a teacher have to do for you to consider them to be a “good” teacher?
4. Reflect on your teachers now and in the past. How impactful has the diversity of your teachers (diverse meaning different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds) been for you as a student and person?
5. Reflect on the diversity of your peers/classmates over your educational experience. How impactful has this been for you as a student and a person?
6. How would you describe the highlights/lowlights of your elementary, middle, and high school experience up to this point?
7. When you have encountered struggles in school, what did you do or who helped you to get past them?
8. Outside of family, who are some people who have motivated you to do well in school?
9. How is your family involved in your education?

10. How does your educational performance impact your personal future goals?

Appendix B

Color Coded Charts: Ticks indicate instances where a student made a comment/response that fell under the category/theme in question.

Q1 – Is it important that schools provide a diverse curriculum? Explain.

Student	A) Diversity is Important/valuing differences	B) Preparedness	C) Survival	D) Feeling/being limited	E) Understanding/empathizing with others
Angel	/	//	/	/	
Brian	/	///	/	/	
Candace	/	/	/	//	///
Danielle	/	//			/
Eric	/	//			///
Frederick	/	/	/		///
Student	F) Acknowledgment of differences	G) Improvement of society/people	H) Exploration	I) Value of Educ./ History/culture	
Angel	//	/	/	/	
Brian	/				
Candace		/		/	
Danielle	/	/			
Eric		/		//	
Frederick				//	

Q2 – Has your coursework consistently included diverse perspectives?

Student	A) Diverse	B) Not Diverse	C) Partially Diverse *Specific classes	D) Watered down/ Shallow coverage	E) Teach for test
Angel	/			//	/
Brian			//		
Candace		///			
Danielle		/	///		
Eric		/	///	/	
Frederick	/	/	////		

Student	F) Gradually diverse (w/grade levels)	G) Changed POV/ Helped me grow	H) Breaks barriers
Angel	/	/	
Brian	/		/
Candace			
Danielle			
Eric			
Frederick			

Q3 – What does a teacher have to do for you to consider them a “good” teacher?

Student	A) Respects student	B) Challenges me/ rigorous	C) Teaches critical thinking	D) Differentiates instruction	E) Engages students
Angel	/	//	/	/	/
Brian				//	
Candace				/	
Danielle					/
Eric	/				//
Frederick					
Student	F) Connects/loves students Relationships	G) Dedication/love what you do	H) Timely/relevant	I) Avoid lectures/ busy work	J) Mastery of subject
Angel					
Brian		//			
Candace	///				
Danielle				////	/
Eric				/	///
Frederick	/	/	/		/

Q4 – How impactful has the diversity of your teachers been for you as a student/person?

Student	A) Female	B) Mostly Caucasian	C) Looks like me	D) Difficult to connect/relate w/other races	E) Few/no AA males
Angel	/	//	/	//	/
Brian	/		/	/	/
Candace		//		//	
Danielle					
Eric					
Frederick		/		///	
Student	F) Comfort of sharing connection	G) Mostly AA	H) Topic avoidance (not AA)	I) Black Culture topics minimized	J) AA mentorship/ positive influence
Angel	/				//
Brian	///	/			
Candace		/	////	/	
Danielle		//			/
Eric					
Frederick	/			/	
Student	K) Lack of role models	L) Missing out	M) Diverse staff	N) No impact	O) Some impact
Angel	/	//			
Brian					
Candace		///			
Danielle			////	/	/
Eric			/	/	
Frederick			/		
Student	P) Impactful	Q) Cultural Exposure to other			
Angel					
Brian					
Candace	/	//			
Danielle		/			
Eric					
Frederick					

Q5 – How impactful has the diversity of your peers been for you as a student/person?

Student	A) Future goals/ outlook informs/impacts	B) Desires/seek diversity. Viewed as a need/preparation	C) Racially homogeneous experiences	D) Impacts world view/ approach/ opinions	E) Lack of diversity viewed as negative
Angel	/	////	/	/	/
Brian		//	/	/	
Candace		//		///	/
Danielle			/		
Eric				//	
Frederick		/	/		

Student	F) Community/similar background/culture Connection	G) Encourages cultural (self) appreciation	H) Inspired by community growth/progress Achievement	I) Diverse classroom experience	J) Diversity had positive impact
Angel	/				
Brian	//	/	//		
Candace					//
Danielle					
Eric				//	//
Frederick				/	//

Student	K) Neutral: not impacted/ doesn't see impact	L) Helped learn about other cultures	M) Gradual diverse settings	N) Learned/navigate different settings/ Code switch	O) Identity awkwardness/ Fear/caution
Angel					
Brian					
Candace		//			
Danielle	/				
Eric		///			
Frederick	/		//	/////	///

Q6 – How would you describe the highs/lows of your school experience?

Student	A) Seen as challenging/ difficult to teach	B) Discouraged/ didn't like school	C) Issues led to poor academic performance	D) Behavior improved/grades improved	E) Mindset shift/ adjusting/ growth
Angel	///	/	/	/	//
Brian					/
Candace					
Danielle					
Eric		/			
Frederick					

Student	F) Good student = positive teacher relationships	G) Respect	H) Behavior/performance impacts teacher relationship	I) Limited opportunities	J) Reluctant to take chances/ contribute opinions
Angel		/	//		
Brian		/		///	/
Candace					
Danielle					
Eric					
Frederick				/	

Student	K) Academic/ subject Challenges	L) Socially awkward/ difficult transitions	M) Finding yourself Identity	N) Personal effort/ Determination	O) Confidence/ Acknowledgement of intelligence accomplishments
Angel					
Brian	/	/			
Candace		/	//		
Danielle	/	/		//	///
Eric	/			/	/
Frederick	/				///

Q7 – When you encountered struggles in school, what did you do or who helped you?

Student	A)Support system/ extrinsic motivation	B) Friends	C) Family/parents	D) Independence/ Teaching myself Determination/ Self-motivation	E) Collaboration/ Peers/ Mutual support
Angel	//	/		///	///
Brian	//		//	///	
Candace			/		/
Danielle	/		/		//
Eric	/		//	/	
Frederick	//			/	
Student	F) Tutoring	G) Self-reflection/ problem assessment/ solving	H) Teacher assistance/ Encouragement	I)Extracurricular/ clubs Accountability	J) Eliminating distractions/ Self-regulation
Angel		/	/		
Brian		//			////
Candace	/		/	///	
Danielle			//	//	
Eric	/		////		
Frederick					

Student	K) Confidence in ability	L) Shame/private/self protection/ trust/ self-confidence	M) Self care/ vent/ meditation	N) Counselors
Angel	/			
Brian		////	///	/
Candace				
Danielle			/	
Eric				
Frederick			//	

Q8 – Outside of family, who are some people who have motivated you to do well in school?

Student	A) School counselors	B) Diverse staff	C) Homogeneous staff (racially)	D) Teachers	E) Outside counselors
Angel	//		/		
Brian	/				/
Candace					
Danielle				/	
Eric					
Frederick				/	
Student	F) Peer encouragement/ Accountability	G) Friends	H) Parents/family friends	I) Mostly women	J) Former teachers
Angel				/	
Brian					/
Candace	////	/			
Danielle	//	/			
Eric	/	/	/		
Frederick		/			

Student	K) Religious community	L) Inspired by other's success	M) Self-driven	
Angel				
Brian	/			
Candace		//		
Danielle		/		
Eric		//		
Frederick			//	

Q9 – How is your family involved in your education?

Student	A) Not involved	B) Independent	C) Reach out to peers/ same Experience	D) 1 st generation	E) Family very involved
Angel	//	/	/	/	
Brian					////
Candace		////			
Danielle	/	/			
Eric					
Frederick		///			
Student	F) Understanding	G) Moderately involved	H) Counselor support	I) Parents not a great resource	J) Frustrated/ resistant
Angel					
Brian	/				
Candace		//	/		
Danielle		//		//	
Eric		//			//
Frederick		/			

Q10 – How does your educational experience impact your personal future goals?

Student	A) Worries for the future	B) Driven	C) Self-care	D) Perfectionism	E) Altruistic
Angel	//	/	/	/	//
Brian				/	
Candace					
Danielle					
Eric					
Frederick		//	/		
Student	F) College prep	G/K) Long term goals/ Helps me plan/figure out what I want to do	H) Networking	I) Important	J) Key to success/ something to fall back on
Angel					
Brian	//	////	//		
Candace				/	//
Danielle	/	///			
Eric	/	//		//	
Frederick		///			

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