

## **ABSTRACT**

Title of Dissertation: Investigating the Stories of Success of Students who are African American and Male in AP English

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Students who are African American and male living in the United States have been marginalized from gifted and talented and Advanced Placement (AP) classes in public education. Students who have enrolled in specifically AP English and have taken an AP English exam have been shown to outperform other types of students in college (Barnard-Brak, McGaha-Garnett, & Burely, 2011; Cech, 2008; Chajewski, Mattern, & Shaw, 2011; Hargrove, Godin, & Dodd, 2008; Keng & Dodd, 2008; Mattern, Marini, & Shaw, 2013; Mustafa & Compton, 2017; Patterson & Ewing, 2013). Attending college and earning a collegiate degree offers a multitude of benefits; however, “college entrance and matriculation for African America students remains critically low,” especially for males (Curry & Shillingford, 2015, p. 14).

This research study examined how students who are African American and male came to enroll in an AP English course, how they maintained their success in an AP English course, what and who influenced them along the way, and what later impact AP English had on their lives, especially as collegiate scholars.

The researcher was the participants' high school AP English teacher and relied on her personal experiences in teaching AP English to frame her research. The participants attended a high school where the ethnicity demographics of students closely mirrored the ethnicity percentages of the U.S. population. The school is well-funded, well-staffed and serves a middle class socio-economic population. Despite this, African American male students who attend this school continue to be underrepresented in AP English courses and in completing and passing AP English exams. Using a cross-comparison of eight distinct case studies following qualitative research protocol, the researcher was able to interview and create narratives of the participants' experiences in AP English. This dissertation analyzes and synthesizes findings from the interviews to establish how the participants enrolled in AP English and maintained success. Additionally, the study focused on the influences on their success and the later impact on their lives.

The findings from this study suggest that for the participants, college acceptance and completion as a "nonnegotiable" significantly influenced their conviction for taking AP English. The participants determined that AP English would influence college acceptance, which is part of the "educational game" students are aware of when attempting to market themselves for college enrollment. Teachers, family members, and peers in G.T. and AP classes were described as influential on enrollment and success.

This study led to the discussion of how to include more students who are African American males in AP English class. It also contributes to educational policy that continues to weigh the pros and cons of offering AP English courses.

INVESTIGATING THE STORIES OF SUCCESS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE  
AFRICAN AMERICAN AND MALE IN AP ENGLISH

by

Erin McArdle

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of  
Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2019

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Dr. Kimberly Griffin  
Dr. Wayne Slater  
Dr. Peggy Wilson

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## DEDICATION

To Scott and Brock, my boys, who inspire me.

“Ode to the Only Black Kid in the Class”

by

Clint Smith (the poet granted permission for use)

You, it seems,  
are the manifestation  
of several lifetimes  
of toil. *Brown v. Board*  
in flesh. Most days  
the classroom feels  
like an antechamber.  
You are deemed expert  
on all things Morrison,  
King, Malcolm, Rosa.  
Hell, weren't you sitting  
on that bus, too?  
You are every-  
body's best friend  
until you are not.  
Hip-hop lyricologist.  
Presumed athlete.  
Free & Reduced sideshow.  
Exception and caricature.  
Too black and too white  
all at once. If you are  
successful it is because  
of affirmative action.  
If you fail it is because  
you were destined to.  
You are invisible until  
they turn on the Friday  
night lights. Here you are  
star before they render  
you asteroid. Before they  
watch you turn to dust.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like thank my family. To my husband, Scott, who provided me with patience, encouragement, love, and support, I could not have made it without you. To my son, Brock, thank you for being quiet and “not bothering Mommy while she worked”--I owe you hours of laughter, love, tickles, and play. To my parents, Brian and Lynn, who always encouraged me to strive to do my best and gave me a love for words. To my in-laws, David and Melanie, for their support in pursuing this degree and for being my cheerleaders.

Secondly, I would like to thank every teacher, professor, and administrator who have influenced even the most remote aspects of my life. You all have had an impact on my love for teaching. I can remember the name of every single teacher and professor I have ever had, and tell you multiple things I have learned from each of them. And, too, thank you to the educational leaders in my life who have inspired me to not accept mediocrity and the status quo.

Thirdly, I want to thank my dissertation committee chair for her tireless efforts on my behalf. Dr. Jennifer Turner, who made qualitative research methods “fun,” has been one of my most inspirational college professors, and she deserves a multifold of thanks for taking me on at the end of my studies. Her instruction in qualitative research methods undoubtedly served as the basis for this research study, and I value all I learned under her tutelage. I appreciate you for being so flexible and working with me these last three years. Dr. Turner’s sense of humor, creative ideas, and permanent smile is motivation for

anyone to make it to the finish line. I am forever grateful.

Lastly, to my dissertation committee, Dr. Ayanna Baccus, Dr. Kimberly Griffin, Dr. Wayne Slater, and Dr. Peggy Wilson, thank you for encouraging, critiquing, and uplifting me through this process. You all have been extremely influential in honing my research skills and writing. I am grateful for the time you took to help me grow as a researcher. This has been an experience I will always treasure. I thank you all for your continuing efforts to improving educational opportunities for all students.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background and Conceptual Framework

*I have always been proud to be an Advanced Placement (AP) English teacher. I like having my students work towards a reachable goal—passing the exam in May. In the beginning of the school year, the students are so unsure. They do not know how to analyze literature or write about it. They do not know how to create effective arguments or synthesize information provided in documents. They do not know how to explain the rhetorical constructs of discourse. But, slowly and surely, over eight months, they, for the most part, end up “getting it.” And, the majority of my students pass the exam, and I think, “Job well done. You are sending those students off to college with literacy skills that will ensure future success.”*

*Hidden behind that simplistic anecdote is an ugly truth that I painfully avoided acknowledging for most of my career. I have been teaching English for twenty-two years, and AP English courses for twenty. For the first part of my career, I taught at a school that served mainly low-income, white families in a working-class suburb of a major city in Maryland. I taught AP English courses at this school for eight years, and the demographics of my classes mirrored the demographics of the school. For the second half of my career, I have been the English Department Chair and AP English teacher at a school that serves one of the wealthiest counties in the U.S. and is also a suburb of that same major city. The students here, unlike the first school where I taught, are culturally diverse. The ethnic demographics of the school are in-line with national demographics.*

*Approximately 50% of the students self-identify<sup>1</sup> as white, 30% as Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, Pacific Islander, or two or more races, and 20% as African American. Additionally, close to 80% of students enroll in post-secondary institutions, which is about 10% higher than the national average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The students here, unlike the first school where I taught, are mostly from a middle class socio-economic level, where the students who qualify for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program (FARMS) averages around 12%, one of the lowest in the state of Maryland (Maryland School Report Cards, 2018).*

*Each school year, I typically teach three sections of AP Language and Composition with a total of almost one hundred students, which is usually about twenty-five percent of the total number of students in the junior class. Every day, I see from my podium mostly female, mostly white students, eager to talk about chapter 7 of *The Great Gatsby* or why the Imagist poetry movement was not a “real” poetry movement. In fact, during this school year (2018-2019), I only have three students who self-identify as African American and male. If my classroom reflected the ethnic demographics currently in the school building, shouldn't there be about twenty more African American students in my classes? And, where were all the boys?*

*Where were all the African American male students whom I saw every day in the hall? The cafeteria? Playing in the band? Running track? On the stage? Arguing for the debate team? Involved in the Student Government Association? When I taught other English courses that were not designated AP, the students looked very much like what I*

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<sup>1</sup> *self-identify*, for the purposes of this study, references the ethnicity marker the parent(s) and student chose when the student was enrolled in a secondary education institution (high school). Additionally, this term will be used to reference the ethnicity indicated by the student on standardized assessments (such as the SAT or AP exams) and/or the ethnicity stated in the application process for post-secondary institutions.

*saw in the hall—diverse. But, in my AP English bubble, all I see is white and female. And worse, in thinking about all the AP students whom I have taught over the course of my career, why have I only had a handful of male students who were African American earn a passing score on an AP English exam? Where are the stories of success in AP English?*

### **Statement of the Problem**

In spite of efforts to increase the demographics in gifted education, such as the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act<sup>2</sup> and the No Child Left Behind Act, “the demographics of gifted education have been resistant to change” (Ford & Whiting, 2010, p. 131). Research time and again shows an under identification of African American students in both gifted and talented courses and AP classrooms (The College Board, 2017; Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford & Whiting, 2010; Grantham, 2011; Klugman, 2013; Warne, Larsen, Anderson, & Odasso, 2015). Approximately 17% of the United States’ student population is African American; however, these students comprise only 8% of gifted and talented and AP classes (Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Ford & Whiting, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Moreover, Grantham (2011) contends “Black male student enrollment is roughly 9%, yet less than 4% of those placed in gifted and talented programs are Black males” (p. 265). Furthermore, research also suggests “Black males are more underrepresented in gifted education than all student groups” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This under-enrollment is not just an exclusionary practice and a contributor to the achievement gap, but it also adds to the “lower educational attainment

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<sup>2</sup> This act awards grants to colleges, states, and districts that focus on underrepresented populations of gifted students, and grants funds to state and districts for program implementation



of already underrepresented minorities in higher education” (Barnard-Brak, McGaha-Garnett, & Burley, 2011, p. 1).

These disturbing statistics prompt an urgent need to address a problem that has been resistant to change. When considering the *why* to this problem of students who are male and African American not being proportionately represented in AP courses, one could easily point to socio-economic disadvantages or a lack of school resources; however, the problem could run much deeper. There are possibly several factors at work here—Milner (2015) suggests that there are “out-of-school factors,” such as unemployment, family influences, parental styles, parental backgrounds, and resources. Milner also maintains that there are “in-school factors,” such as instruction, resources within a school, administration, teachers, school culture, and relationships with teachers, parents, students, and the community. Although some educators and researchers may find race and/or ethnicity difficult to consider due to our contemporary cultural climate, in actuality, it is one of the most significant aspects to study currently because students who are African American and male continue to be unacceptably underserved by U.S. public education. Student enrollment in AP courses and success on AP exams have been used as gauges of possible success in college. AP programs are typically viewed as a way to prepare students for college and are continued to be publicized as a pathway to success; however, African American enrollment success in AP courses has continued to remain stagnant.

### **Benefits of Advanced Placement English Courses**

In many secondary schools across the U.S., AP classes are offered to provide students with the chance to receive college credit by participating in a semester or year-

long course which concludes with a comprehensive exam. The exam is scored on a 5-point scale (a 5 out of 5 considered the most successful score). The College Board maintains that the benefits of taking AP courses and passing exams are multifold—the rigorous academics provided in high school AP classes introduce students to college-level material and expectations, and they provide an opportunity to accumulate college credit before graduation. AP courses typically offer higher-level curricular content than the traditional classroom. The College Board created AP programs in 1952 to provide potential college credit for students considered high achieving. The College Board itself does not provide the college credit—the potential to earn credit is decided by the college or university to which a student applies. Additionally, all colleges and universities do not grant students college credit for AP courses, and some will only grant credit for students who earn a certain score. For example, according to The College Board (2018), the University of Maryland, College Park, will grant an undergraduate student credit for English 101 if he or she scores a 4 or 5 on the AP Language and Composition exam, Yale (New Haven, Connecticut) requires a 5 to earn the English credit, West Liberty University (West Liberty, West Virginia) requires a 3, and St. John’s College (Annapolis, Maryland) does not offer credit for any AP courses.

There are currently more than thirty AP courses that secondary schools potentially can offer students, which gives students the opportunity to be exposed to college-level curriculum and earn college credits for successfully completing the course. Presently, The College Board offers two courses that are typically offered to high school students for English or language arts credits—AP Literature and Composition and AP Language and Composition. Most schools and districts in the U.S. interchangeably offer these

courses in eleventh and twelfth grade. The content and skills for each class have some similarities; however, neither course is a prerequisite for the other. The AP Literature and Composition course focuses on literary analysis, poetry explication, and expository, argumentative, and analytic composition (AP Central, 2018). The AP Language and Composition course emphasizes rhetorical analysis, using evidence to write argumentative and analytic responses, and synthesis skills demonstrating appropriate citations (AP Central, 2018). Both courses provide rigorous content and skill development in literacy.

AP English courses and exams consistently are the most popular with students. In 2018, 581,431 students took the AP Language and Composition exam and 404,962 students took the AP Literature and Composition exam (total AP English exams were 986,393). For comparison, globally 5,103,166 total AP exams were taken in May of 2018, which indicates that approximately 20% (close to one million) of the AP exams taken were one of the two English exams. Comparatively, 503,759 students took the AP United States History exam and 312,299 took the AP AB Psychology exam, which round out the four most taken exams. From these data, which historically have not changed, English exams are the most taken of any AP subject area.

Although AP English courses and exams tend to be the most popular, African American students continue to be the most underrepresented group in AP classrooms and in the population of successful AP English exam takers (AP Report to the Nation, 2014). Advanced literacy skills attained in an AP English class, especially in this Information Age, still undoubtedly have value for all students and could potentially help close the achievement gap for students who are African American.

A benefit of taking AP courses in high school is “that one will develop study skills necessary to successfully complete college, especially for students who might become the first family member to attend college or among peer groups who do not consider education a promising option for the future” (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007, p. 176). Therefore, the rigor of college-level material a student is exposed to in a high school English AP course might help students earn a college degree. Additionally, former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan upholds:

The AP program shows that great teaching, rigor and strong, engaging curriculum matter a great deal--even for students with similar abilities. AP students are 50 percent more likely to graduate from college in four years than a control group of students with the same SAT score and socioeconomic background.

Why does taking AP classes alone make such a difference? Because as all of you know, AP courses develop the study skills, critical reasoning, and habits of mind that prepare students for the transition to college. AP classes also give students, particularly first-generation college goers, the confidence that they can successfully handle college-level work. (Duncan, 2010, para. 41-42)

Recent educational policy indicates that colleges and universities are concerned about enrolling more students from diverse backgrounds to ensure an inclusive student body and to minimize the achievement gap. However, colleges and universities also have a vested interest in increasing graduation rates for these students. Research suggests that students who take AP courses in high school have much higher graduation rates than

those who do not; thus college readiness<sup>3</sup> and meeting the learning objectives of the Common Core<sup>4</sup> is of utmost importance (Buck, Kostin & Morgan, 2002; Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2005). Conley (2007) maintains that performing well on an AP exam means more than just accomplishing college-level work; it is a pathway to success in college. His research consistently shows that students who score a 3 or higher on AP exams typically experience greater academic success in college and have higher graduation rates than otherwise comparable non-AP peers. Additionally, Bettinger, Evans, and Pope (2011) studied the most important academic skills that were essential to college success and found that English and math skills had the most significant predictive power of college GPA and persistence. They found “regardless of outcome measure, the common thread of the research established the importance of developing academic content, skills, and habits before matriculating into a postsecondary institution” (p. 212). Therefore, AP English skill development and content most likely has a positive correlation to future collegiate success.

Furthermore, some school districts use AP scores as a mark of distinction on their high school diploma. For example, the state of Maryland, through the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), has adopted the Maryland College and Career

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<sup>3</sup> *college readiness* means that a student can complete entry-level college requirements without remediation. Students who are enrolled in remediation courses in their first year of college have only a 17-39% graduation rate (College Board, 2004). In order for a student to be considered *college ready*, students need to think critically and problem solve in the context of a continuously changing set of circumstances and realities, maintain strong literacy skills, and have the capacity to communicate effectively with individuals from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds (Center of College Readiness, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> *The Common Core* is a set of high-quality academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA). These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live (Core Standards, 2018).

Readiness Standards, which affect every grade level except Pre-K. The goal of these standards is to ensure that students leave high school prepared for success in college or a career (Maryland State Department of Education, 2018). Students are currently considered to be College and Career Ready<sup>5</sup> if they achieve a certain score on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment (typically given in tenth grade), earn a certain score on the SAT or ACT, earn a 4 or higher on English and math Inter Baccalaureate (IB) exams, earn a score of 3 or higher on at least one of the AP English exams and one of the AP Math exams—AB Calculus, BC Calculus, or AP Statistics, or pass the Accuplacer (a diagnostic test that most community colleges in Maryland use to determine whether remedial classes are required before full course enrollment). If students do not meet these standards by the end of eleventh grade (four of the five options are their own financial responsibility), then students are required to complete a transitional course (online or community college at their own expense), or can “re-take” the above mentioned standardized assessments in an attempt to earn a designated score. Some students, if the option is available at their school, can meet this standard if they complete a Maryland Career and Technology Program of Study, such as pharmaceutical technician or early childhood education. However, these career academies are not available in all school districts in Maryland. If students do not complete at least one of the options by graduation, the students do not earn the proverbial stamp of College and Career Ready and are deemed **not** college and career ready, which at this point, is indicated on their final high school transcript.

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<sup>5</sup> The following assessment options can be found in *Tool Kit to Determine Students College and Career Ready Under the College and Career Readiness Completion Act of 2013*

An additional benefit besides being exposed to rigorous content and being more likely to graduate from college is that scoring well on an AP exam can lower college and university costs. Completing AP courses and earning college credit has the potential to offer students the ability to spend less time in college, thus alleviating some of the expenses students encounter in funding their undergraduate pursuits. Typically, AP courses at public high schools are free,<sup>6</sup> and the cost per exam is \$100.00 (AP Central, 2018). Hypothetically, students could potentially complete ten AP courses for less than \$1,000, earn thirty undergraduate credits, and enroll in a college or university as a sophomore. Students who demonstrate financial need (such as qualifying for free and reduced lunch programs, demonstrating that family income is at or below the poverty level, or living in foster care) can petition the College Board for a fee reduction, which could bring the price of an exam to \$53.00 (AP Central, 2018). Moreover, some local, state and federal educational programs use funding to help students pay for exams. Consequently, successful completion of AP courses provides students with a significant financial incentive (Cross, 2008).

Although many high schools offer AP courses, there are major racial and ethnic differences in who actually takes AP exams. Research has shown that less than 1% of African American students take at least one AP exam, and that the median percentage for male students who earn a grade of 3 or high was zero (Handwerk, Tognatta, Coley, and Gitomer, 2008). Additionally, the College Board's *AP Report to the Nation* (2014), reports "Black/African American students in the graduating class of 2013 were the most underrepresented group in AP classrooms and in the population of successful AP Exam

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<sup>6</sup> some teachers, schools, or districts may require students to purchase books, calculators, software, study guides, etc.

takers” (p. 30). Furthermore, in an analysis of AP exam scores in 2011, “only 4.1% of African Americans earned a passing score [and] nearly half of all African American students earned the lowest possible score” (Davis, Davis, and Mobley, 2013, p. 33). The College Board does report that the African American students AP participation is increasing, but there still is “no state with large numbers of African Americans [that] has successfully closed the achievement and equity gaps” (College Board, 2012).

This exclusionary phenomenon can have detrimental effects, especially when used as a pathway to higher learning because students need at least a score of 3 to earn college credit. Furthermore, there is evidently an achievement gap between African American students’ AP exam scores and other ethnic groups’. In 2008, close to 70% of AP exams taken by white students earned a passing score of 3 or higher; however, less than 30% of African American exam takers earned a passing score (Cross, 2008).

Worse, AP English courses and exams are some of the most popular courses and exams for African American students to take, but less than 25% of African American students earn a passing score, and most passers are female (Cross, 2008).

In this new Information Age, workforce needs have changed. More and more careers and job opportunities require education beyond high school. Additionally, higher levels of formal education often provide an increase in earnings. A U.S. Department of Education study concluded that African American, Latino, and low-income students are three times more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree if they even attempt an AP class in high school (Adelman, 2006).



### **Contextual Background**

There is much research on students who are African American and male, and their lack of school achievement and educational success (Ferguson, 2003; Ford & Harris 1996; Fordham, 1998; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Flowers, 2002; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1993; Noguera, 2003a, 2009b; Ogbu, 2003). Additionally, there are very few studies (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004) that explore the lived experiences of male, African American students who meet with success in AP courses, and virtually none on these students who successfully complete AP English courses and earn a passing score on either of the two AP English exams—Literature and Composition and Language and Composition.

This study offers educational value because students who are male and African American continue to be the most underrepresented group who take AP courses (in all areas) **and** score a 3 or higher on the exam. Taking AP courses continues to offer students benefits and advantages, such as increased literacy development, priority enrollment in colleges and universities, preparation for college-level material, financial benefits of scholarships or earned college credit, and participation in secondary education classes that offer a “college culture,” over students who do not take these courses.

I, the researcher, have first-hand experience with my research questions because I teach AP English courses at a high school where students who are African American and male are significantly underrepresented in all AP English classes. However, there are a handful of students I have taught who are male and African American who have met with **success**, which, for the purposes of this study is described as **a student who has enrolled in an AP English course, received exemplary grades (“A’s” or “B’s” or a 79.6% or**

**higher in coursework grades) in the class, participated in college-level discourse, received a passing score on the AP exam (3 or higher), and enrolled in a college or university.** In teaching these students, I have had my own conversations and observations, which have given me insight into the problem and have helped frame my research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the perspectives and experiences of eight students who are African American and male who met with success in an AP English course, to describe the distinct experiences and circumstances of these students, to identify the practices that lead to success, to search for new relationships and findings, to offer insight in improving current educational practices that may or may not affect these students, and to inform further research and inquiry on the marginalization of students who are African American and male in AP English courses.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do students who are African American and male come to enroll in an AP English course? What led them to the point where they decided to register for an AP English class?
2. How do students who are African American and male explain their own “story of success” in terms of earning a “3” or higher on an AP English exam and by maintaining at least a 79.5% in an AP English course?
3. How do these students who met with success in AP English courses describe the influences, experiences, and practices (from a societal, familial, educational, and cultural perspective) that led to their success?

4. How do the participants believe their success in AP English affected their later lived experiences?

### **Significance of Study**

Research in the area of adolescent African American males is limited to a large number of studies that focus on shortfalls and deficiencies, especially in comparison to their white peers. For example, if one typed into Google Scholar “African American boys education,” research related to the “trouble with black boys,” “the disproportionate placement of black boys in special education,” “classroom challenges for low achieving black boys in poverty,” and “the school to prison pipeline” will appear in the first ten citations. Most research studies have utilized methodology that has taken a “where is the problem?” approach and have focused on what the *problem* is versus what the *solution* is. Focusing on the problem over the solution overlooks evidence of student success for marginalized students, which limits research to assuming that these students need to be normalized (according to their white counterparts) and gaining a better understanding of how and why students can be successful in schools in the U.S. Few research studies focus on the phenomenon of success, which is meaningful because these students are often influenced and dominated by the same repressive forces by society and schools as those students who do not meet with success. What are these successful students doing, thinking, experiencing, and practicing when presented with similar situations that other researchers have found contributed to marginalization?

This study contributes to the discourse on what may influence the successes of students who are African American and male and contributes to educators’ current understanding of how to help these students and minimize their marginalization in AP

courses. For African American male students this is particularly important, as this structural inequality could contribute to a “road to failure” later in life. Data and research, as discussed in the literature review, demonstrate that African American males do not always have the opportunities to thrive and prosper, which sometimes leads to negative consequences (such as expulsion from schools, dropping out of school, and possible incarceration) for themselves. Society at large, too, can benefit because increased success in school for African American males can minimalize some of the risks they may confront.

### **Conclusion**

Young African American men are at more risk than any other racial and ethnic group to have lower college preparedness, graduation rates, and literacy development. Meeting with success in an AP English course, for these students, may offer a chance to minimize these risks and ensure a brighter future. There is a pressing need for further research on what can curtail this phenomenon of AP marginalization. African American male students are not passive subjects who experience schooling in a bubble, and we would all benefit from understanding more of what influences their academic successes. This study will also give us a chance to hear their voices, which will illuminate their own experiences and give them a chance to have their own voices acknowledged. Research beyond finding the “problem” is needed for schools to become more supportive and nurturing; consequently, African American males may see schools as a system of support instead of a bleak place. Successful completion of AP courses should become the standard, instead of the exception.

## CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To anchor this study, it is important to determine and analyze some of the potential reasons why students who are African American and male are not enrolling in AP English classes and not passing AP English exams after completing the course. Understanding this problem in the area of a student's literacy skills is important because enrollment in an AP English course could "empower students to strengthen their academic skills, perform better in other subjects, read the world more critically and analytically (both inside and outside of school) and move out of poverty" (Milner, 2015, p. 81). Acceptance into and completion of college is important for minimizing marginalization of students because "black students who complete high school are less likely than white students to enroll in college" (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011, p. 11). Additionally, Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, and Hwany (2017) in their report *A National View of Student Attainment Rates by Race and Ethnicity*, found "among students who started in four-year public institutions, black men had the lowest completion rate (40.0 percent) and the highest dropout (41.1 percent)" (p. 2). College completion could have numerous benefits to both individuals and society because individuals may have better career satisfaction, which could ultimately affect society's growth and competitiveness.

This literature review will highlight other researchers' findings in the area of students who are African American and male not meeting with success in the U.S. educational system. Connections to how this may specifically impact students who are not meeting with success in an AP English course or AP exam will be made evident. Additionally, through the data collection and analysis process of this study, participants

reference some or several of these implications as influential in their “success stories;” therefore, a thorough investigation is needed to ground findings.

### **Outline of the Literature Review**

Research on the educational experiences of students who are African American and male is mainly limited to scrutinizing problems versus finding explanations for these students’ successes. Following a contextualization of the literature that focuses on the potential explanations and reasons why students who are African American and male are unsuccessful in today’s schools, a presentation of the limited research that has focused on students who meet with success will be offered. Also addressed within the literature review will be some of the oversights of previous researchers in relation to determining the *why* behind the lack of success.

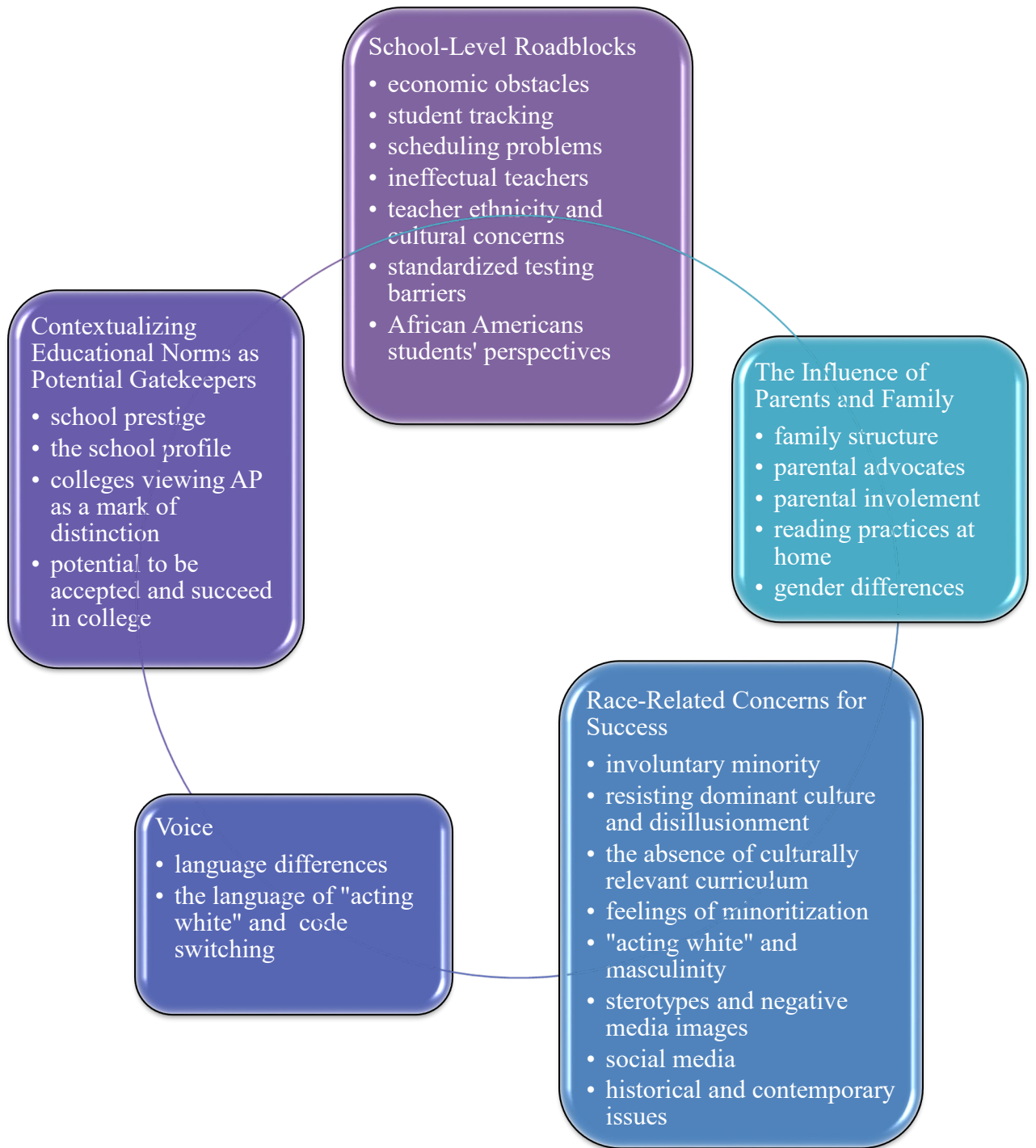
This literature review will discuss the following...

1. How school-level roadblocks to AP English success—economic obstacles, student tracking barriers, scheduling complications, ineffectual teachers’ influence, teacher ethnicity and cultural concerns, standardized testing impediments, and students’ perceptions—can all provide problems.
2. How educational norms in secondary schools and colleges can act as gatekeepers from success on an AP English exam, from acceptance into a college, and from completing an undergraduate education. School prestige, school profiles, college perceptions of AP, and the potential of AP as an indicator of college success can influence a student’s educational trajectory.
3. How race-related concerns—being an involuntary minority, resisting dominant culture, existing disillusionment, lacking a culturally relevant curriculum, feelings

of minoritization, being “cool,” acting “White,” conceptualizing masculinity, prevailing stereotypes, remaining negative media images, and participating in social media—can contribute to the underrepresentation of African American males in AP English courses.

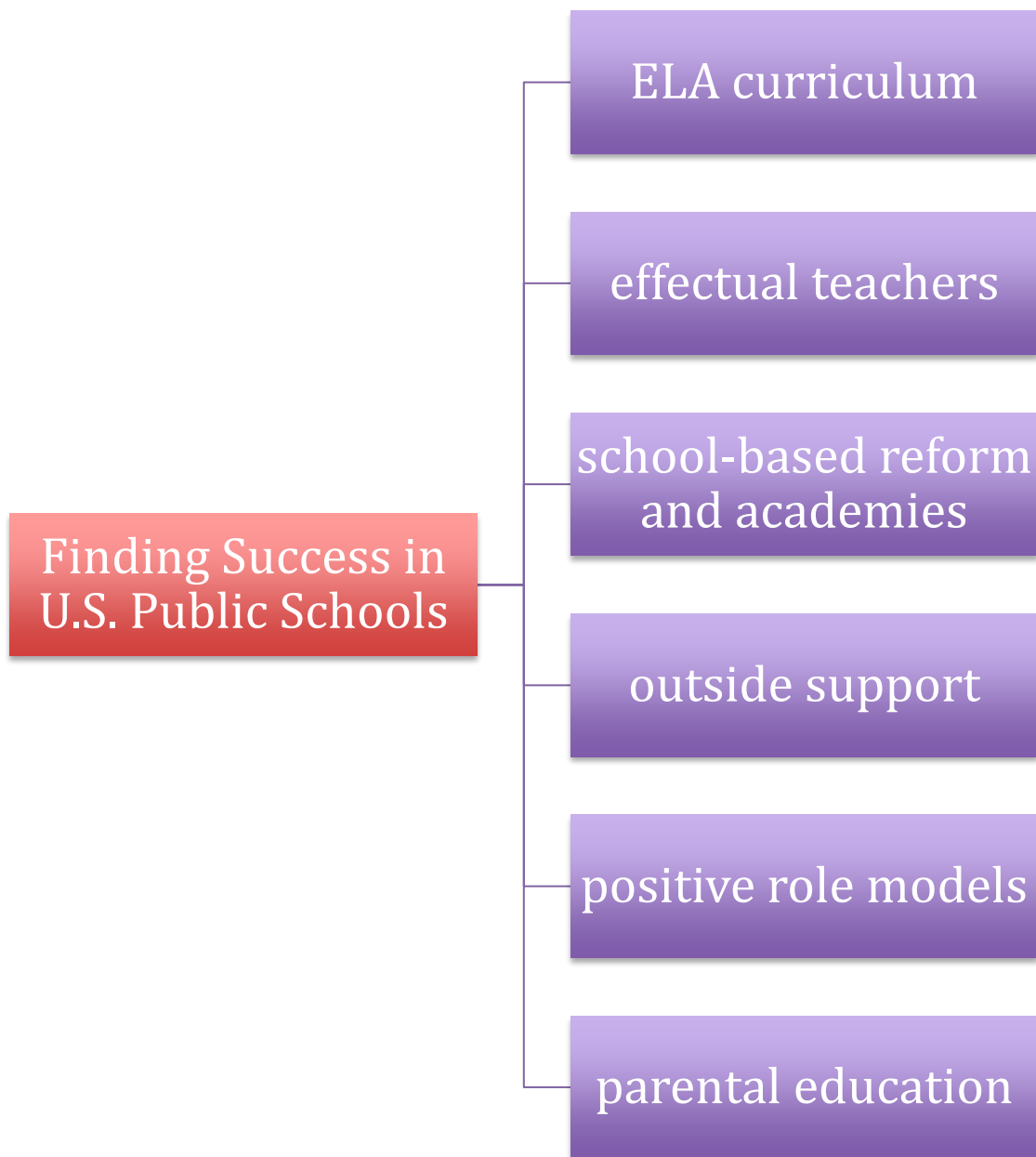
4. How historical and contemporary issues related to race, such as slavery, segregation, and No Child Left Behind, impede literacy.
5. How the influence of parents and family, such as family structures, parental advocates and involvement, reading practices, and gender differences can affect potential success.
6. How the student’s voice—mostly related to language—can affect success.

The literature review will then move into a discussion of students who are African American who meet with academic success. These factors, such as utilizing a culturally relevant curriculum, having effectual teachers, attending schools that have been reformed, participating in academies, having outside support and role models, and having parents with high levels of educational attainment, have indicated an increase in academic success and improvement in literacy.



**Table 1. The Deficit-Oriented Research Impeding Success**





**Table 2. The Research Demonstrating Success**

**School-Level Roadblocks for Success in AP English Courses**

There are several current barriers in U.S. secondary public schools that are impeding academic success, especially in AP English courses for students who are African American and male. These school-level barriers include economic obstacles, student tracking issues, scheduling problems, ineffectual teachers, teacher cultural concerns, standardized testing barriers, and students' perceptions. These roadblocks affect many students, but of interest in this study is how they particularly may affect students who are African American and male. Additionally, some participants in this study have been subjected to many of these roadblocks and found these issues to be major obstructions in their path to success; however, some have found that they did not encounter these roadblocks or that they had little impact on their "story of success."

**Economic obstacles.** A factor that could influence the underrepresentation of African American males in AP English courses is the distinct differences in "educational opportunities for rich versus poor students; [and that] many minority children must attend classes taught by under qualified teachers in classrooms that lack access to adequate resources (Kyburg et al., 2007, p. 175). It is a reality that school systems with more funding attract more highly qualified teachers, have better materials/technology, and offer a cleaner, safer learning environment, which are often linked to increased student achievement. Steele (1997) maintains:

African American students have long been disproportionately represented in lower socioeconomic classes (SES), [which] surely contributes to their academic patterns in school, both through material limitations associated with lower SES (poor schools, lack of resources for school persistence, etc.) and through the

ability of these limitations, by downgrading school-related prospects to undermine identification with school. (p. 616)

Worldwide, researchers have established a substantial correlation between SES and academic achievement to the severe disadvantage of students and schools with lower SES backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Sirin, 2005). Data over the last five years reveal that “students from the lowest income quartile transition to college at a rate of only 56 percent” (Clinedinst et al., 2011). For schools that serve many students who are African American and male, it may be difficult to offer AP courses because the schools do not have the finances to run the courses—they might not be able to train teachers, utilize expensive resources, or have enough students interested in enrolling.

**Student tracking issues.** Student tracking, the idea of grouping students based on perceived ability or academic potential, can also be obstructing students who are African American and male from enrolling in AP English courses. Tracking is still used at the majority of large, public middle and high schools in the United States (Legette, 2017; Lucas & Berends, 2002). Consequently, research shows that African Americans in the U.S. “are more likely tracked into nonhonors tracks rather than honors tracks impacting the racial disparities found between White and Black adolescents in grades, attainment, and achievement” (Legette, 2017, p. 1). Drawing on this historical evidence, “a race-coded hierarchy continues to reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate disadvantage,” which could be a contributing factor for students not enrolling in an AP English course (Lucas & Berends, 2002, p. 328).

Oakes and Guiton (1995), authoritative researchers on secondary school tracking in the U.S., argue that tracking produces immense disparities in schooling opportunities for students that influences their academic futures. Their research on the negative effects of tracking secondary students is rooted in science and mathematics classes, but parallels and findings can be generalized to all high school subject areas. For example, they found several problems within schools that could account for lack of enrollment in advanced courses, such as early tracking often later influencing future tracking, prerequisites frequently influencing placements, and that once a student was placed on a certain track, he or she rarely left that track (Oakes & Guiton, 1995). Their research also suggests that school schedules, staffing, the “day to day” running of a school, and the belief of decision makers that students are not capable and/or interested in higher-level content courses could influence how students would be scheduled for courses. Oakes and Guiton also found that there were also deep-rooted cultural influences at play, such as schools offering more courses which they believed the students needed (such as more vocational offerings for low income and/or minority students), and that the decision-makers’ perceptions of ethnicity and social class could all influence how a student was tracked. Oakes and Guiton argue that local constraints fit into a larger context of affluent and white students having more opportunities to take courses with considerable exchange value beyond high school.

In more contemporary research that was built on Oakes’ work, Chmielewski, Dumont, and Trautwein (2013) maintain that tracking unfairly distributes instructional practice within schools. In their study, they set out to determine if students in lower track courses receive lower-quality instruction than students in upper track courses. The

researchers studied six schools and conducted 427 classroom observations in math and English classes. They focused especially on teacher interactions and found “low track classes in our sample were observed to have significantly lower emotional, organizational, and instructional support than high track classes, confirming that the low track classrooms in our sample provided a systematically lower-quality educational experience” (p. 189). The detrimental effects of tracking might significantly affect a student’s chance in enrolling in an AP English course, having an effectual educational experience, and may hinder chances of acceptance to a post-secondary college or university.

**Scheduling problems.** Although districts may influence whether or not a school offers AP courses, it is usually the decision of the school (Iatarola et al., 2011). This suggests that the running of AP courses is often determined by the experience and qualifications of a school’s staff. Typically, schools that serve students from low SES backgrounds have less experienced teachers who are not highly qualified, which may eliminate the possibility for schools to offer AP classes. Noted researchers in the field of teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Ravitch, 2016), cite several possibilities for effectual teachers being absent from low SES schools such as teacher salaries, working conditions, and the lack of teacher incentives.

Additionally, principals and administrators in lower SES schools may not prioritize the need for AP courses, focusing on other perceived higher-ranking demands, such as increasing attendance, decreasing expulsions and suspensions, connecting with the community, or raising graduation rates. Contemporary research still suggests that “schools with higher percentages of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch

programs (FRPL) were less likely to offer AP and enriched curricula, and the average enrollment in these courses also was lower” (Clinedinst et al., 2011). Additionally, Klugman (2013) found that students from low SES families were the least likely to enroll in AP courses because of “disadvantages in academic preparation, fewer perceived opportunities for upward mobility, or less confidence to assert their rights to advanced coursework” (p. 4). Students who are African American and male and from low SES families may not have equal access to AP courses because of the limitations of school funding, which again is an oppressing force in the upward mobility for students who are African American and male.

**Ineffectual teachers.** Teachers’ effectiveness could also be obstructing African American male students from taking and excelling in AP English classes. There clearly is a difference between an ineffective teacher and an effective teacher, and one would be hard pressed to find a person who does not believe that some teachers are better at helping students learn than other teachers. For this literature review, teacher effectiveness could be measured in many ways, such as personal characteristics, content background, attitude, management style, culture, learning environment, pre-service training, years of experience, professional development, gender, race, religion, and age.

One area of concern in teacher effectiveness is the impact of having a novice teacher on student achievement. New teachers may have limited experience to the classroom and content, which may contribute to student success. Investigations into the practices of novice teachers (Talbert-Johnson, 2006) suggest that although many are employed in urban schools, most would choose to teach in a suburban school that “teaches few ethnically diverse and impoverished students” (p. 151). In one study,

Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2005) found that African American students in North Carolina were 38% more likely to have a novice teacher in English, and that “for the state as a whole, black students are at a disadvantage relative to white students in terms of their exposure to novice teachers and, in most cases, the differences are significantly significant” (p. 386). One predominant researcher in the area of teacher quality and student achievement has conducted several studies that examine how teacher qualifications and characteristics relate to student achievement. Darling-Hammond (2000) found through a national study of policies, analyses, test scores, and surveys that teacher preparation and certification were strongly correlated to student achievement, especially in reading (while controlling for socio-economic status and language status). In fact, she found that “teacher quality variables appear to be more strongly related to student achievement than class sizes, overall spending levels, and teacher salaries” (p. 32). Since her study, Darling-Hammond has continued to study and write about the influences of teachers’ effectualness on student achievement, and has continued to call for equity and equality for all students, especially for those in poverty. However, recent educational reports on the distribution of teacher quality in the U.S. demonstrates that experienced teachers with strong content knowledge continue to be disproportionate:

Students in high-minority schools are assigned to novice teachers at twice the rate as students in schools without many minority students. Students in high-poverty and high minority schools also are shortchanged when it comes to getting teachers with a strong background in the subjects they are teaching. Classes in high-poverty and high minority secondary schools are more likely to be taught by ‘out-

of-field teachers’ – those without a major or minor in the subject they teach.

(Peske & Haycock, 2006, p. 2).

All students deserve to have effectual teachers to increase the likelihood that students will increase literacy skills. Students who are African American and male are more likely than their peers to have inexperienced, ineffectual, uncertified teachers, which may continue to contribute to the marginalization of these students, especially in AP courses.

**Teacher ethnicity and cultural concerns.** Teacher effectiveness has been shown to significantly impact student achievement; however, the cultural perspectives of teachers themselves also could have an impact. In U.S. public schools, research has consistently maintained that the majority of teachers are white and female (Allen, 2015; Allen & White, 2014; Ford & Harris, 1996; Talbert-Johnson, 2006). This demographic has been resistant to change; however, enrollment for minorities continues to rise (National Center for Educational Statistics 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Over the last few decades, there has been increased attention given to preparing teachers to have a better understanding of cultural and ethnic diversity when teaching students who come from diverse backgrounds; however, teachers may still come to the classroom with their own prejudices and/or may be influenced by their own culture, upbringing, and experiences. Research has suggested “too many believe that others, particularly White American educators and adults, have low expectations of them [students who are African American] academically, intellectually, and socially” (Ford et al., 2008, p. 224). Educators’ biases and preconceptions affect their beliefs in what children can and cannot do, and if teachers have “low expectations” for students, then they may think their students cannot rise to the academic challenges presented in AP courses or recommend



students for AP courses. Although many teacher preparation programs include curriculum addressing diversity issues, research suggests that teacher preparation programs continue to prepare students for white, middle-class populations (Allen, 2015, Cochran-Smith, 2000; Hill & Tyson 2009).

Teacher perceptions of students could be contributing to the marginalization of African American males from AP English courses. Grantham (2011) argues that African American male enrollment should be comparable to overall enrollment in advanced curriculum courses, but is not, due to a phenomenon he calls “the bystander effect.” He claims that teachers continue to not intervene in helping students enroll in AP courses and take exams because of four core beliefs of teachers—one, that their classes will have to be watered down; two, by not addressing the pressures put on African American males when taking a class with a large number of white students; three, by ignoring racial differences and true needs; and four, by thinking the marginalization is someone else’s problem (Grantham, 2011). Other researchers (Ladson-Billings, 1996) argue that white teachers often take a “colorblind<sup>7</sup>” approach when working with minority students, which could contribute to white teachers trusting their own understandings of race. This could be problematic if their understandings mimic those of stereotypes and prejudice.

Another contributing factor for African American males being underrepresented in AP courses may be due to the perception that they may choose not to take AP courses because there are cultural differences between themselves and the traditional AP teacher. A College Board study found that there were low proportions of AP teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). Some research has suggested that

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<sup>7</sup> Claiming not to see or be influenced by the race or ethnicity of their students and/or assuming all school policies and procedures are racially neutral (Ladson-Billings, 1996).

African Americans “may deliberately retain distinguishing characteristics of their own ethnicity as symbols of resistance to domination in mainstream culture as alien. This opposition may manifest itself in refusal to conform to mainstream educational” (Kyburg et al., 2007, p. 184). This concept suggests that students who are African American may not want to take courses that are typically taught by teachers who have cultural and/or ethnic differences. Furthermore, a research study conducted by the Institute of Labor Economics (2017) found that “having at least one black teacher in third through fifth grades reduced a black student’s probability of dropping out of school by 29 percent” and that “for low-income black boys, the results are even greater—their chance of dropping out fell 39 percent” (Johns Hopkins University, 2017). Additionally, the study found that these same male students had a “29% increased interest in pursuing college” (Johns Hopkins University, 2017). This study suggests that for students who are African American, the ethnicity of their teacher may have an influence on their success. If the typical AP English teacher is white, students may be impacted. Cultural and ethnic differences may be a determining factor for students who are African American and male choosing to enroll in an AP English course and may possibly influence their degree of success in the course if they enroll.

Possibly even more damaging for students who are African American and male is the idea that “educators and students (Black females and students identified as races other than Black) may perceive Black males in negative terms” (Henfield, 2012, p. 184). Teachers come to school with their own preconceived ideas and stereotypes that may detrimentally affect how they view students who are male and African American. Ford and Harris (1996) found that white teachers were less likely to recommend African

American students for AP courses. Additionally, Allen and White (2014) maintain that “teachers regularly perceive their black male students as deviant, and interpret black male behaviors as overly aggressive, disrespectful, defiant, and intimidating, even if the intent of these behaviors is just the opposite” (p. 448). Alarming, Milner’s (2015) text *Rac(e)ing to Class*, which provides a context for educators to understand how to teach students who are in poverty or are a minority, suggests “teachers and administrators may indeed be afraid of their African American and Latino students and consequently be less willing to work with them to improve” (p. 124). Milner’s text presents educational strategies founded on established literature, foundational studies, and his own experiences, for teachers who “may fear the bodies of students—their physical makeup, not the students themselves” (p. 124).

Love (2014) suggests that “negative social constructs regarding Black males are ubiquitous to American life and, therefore, reach every corner of our schools. Too often, teachers make judgments concerning Black male students having nothing to do with their intellectual ability and everything to do with stereotypes, assumptions, and fear” (p. 294). She also maintains “research clearly illustrates that Black males’ performance of masculinity is misunderstood by teachers, and therefore targeted as oppositional. Black boys are seen as defiant and intimidating by White middle-class teachers” (p. 301). Therefore, if AP English courses are typically taught by white, middle class female teachers, their preconceptions and stereotypes of students who are African American may continue to act as a roadblock.

**Standardized testing barriers.** Students are often recommended for advanced courses based on results from standardized tests and grades, which could limit students

who are African American enrolling in an AP English course. Archbald, Glutting, and Qian (2009), in their analysis of the influence of grades, test scores and tracking, argue that “placement decisions based solely on measurable academic criteria will result in disproportionately low representation of African American students in more advanced courses and academic tracks” (p. 67). Although the College Board reports that the number of exams being taken by African American students is increasing, “the mean grade earned on AP exams has declined for students in all racial and ethnic categories, except for those in the ‘Asian, Asian-American, or Pacific Islander’ category” (Cech, 2008, p. 3). Some research claims that poor test performance is the most significant reason African Americans are underrepresented in gifted education (Archibald et al., 2009; Ford & Whiting, 2010; Steele, 1997). When students have a negative perception of not being able to be successful on standardized assessments, they may shrink from taking a course where passing a standardized exam, such as in AP courses, is the main objective. Nicols (2016), in her chapter on high stakes testing in *The Handbook of Social Influences in School Contexts*, notes that “there is also growing data on troubling practices emerging in high-stakes testing contexts that have more insidious effects on poor minority students’ motivation” and that for “certain groups of students, testing pressures not only diminish their motivation, but they undermine it completely (p. 321). Whiting (2009), a researcher who studies students who are African American and gifted, also contends that “the overall achievement scores for Black male students are below those of other groups” (p. 225). Therefore, if students who are African American and male do not think they will be successful on a standardized assessment, they might assume that taking an AP course will not be worth the effort.

Another significant area in standardized testing in U.S. public schools is The Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and American College Testing (ACT), which all use a metric system to supposedly determine academic ability and talent. PSAT and SAT, like AP exams, are owned, created, and administered through the same company—the College Board. The ACT is a competitor for the SAT. Colleges and universities have been using scores on the SAT and ACT to determine if a student is apparently college ready. Although the effectiveness as a college ability measurement of the SAT or PSAT is outside the scope of this literature review, the PSAT/NMSQT is of interest because it provides students, parents, teachers, school counselors, and administrators with a AP Potential<sup>8</sup> score, which educators often use when making AP course recommendations. When 3.4 million students take this assessment and are deemed to either *have* or *not have* AP potential, the PSAT could be an influential factor in African American males being encouraged by teachers, guidance counselors, or administrators in enrolling in AP English courses. According to The College Board Total Group Profile Report (2013), African American/Black males have the lowest mean test score in critical reading, mathematics, and writing, at times falling 100 points (out of 800) below their white counterparts. Therefore, students who are African American and male and have potential ability may be overlooked simply because their AP Potential score did not signify to decision-makers in schools that they *could* be successful.

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<sup>8</sup> AP Potential is a web-based tool that allows schools to generate rosters of students who are likely to score a 3 or higher on a given AP Exam based on their performance on the PSAT/NMSQT, PSAT 8/9, or PSAT 10. AP Potential is rooted in research, which reports moderate to strong correlations between PSAT/NMSQT scores and AP Exam results. Through College Board's research, they have found that PSAT/NMSQT scores are strong predictors of students' AP Exam scores, even more so than traditional factors such as high school grades and grades in same-discipline course work. AP Potential was designed to help increase access to AP and to ensure that no student who has the chance of succeeding in AP is overlooked (College Board, 2018).

**African American students' perceptions.** Today's classroom does not necessarily look that different from the classroom of twenty, or even fifty, years ago. There may be more technology; however, the aspect of the teacher as an "all-knowing" authority has been resistant to change. Wiggan (2014) found that in a study of African American students' perceptions of school that African American students did not always believe that standardized test scores and grades were accurate measures of achievement, which still seemingly act as measures of success in U.S. public schools. Wiggan's research question was: What is the meaning of student achievement among high achieving African American students? He conducted a mixed-methods study on African American students who attended an urban university in the south. He used mainly interview and observation data, and found:

The students in the study described high school classrooms as being extremely teacher-centered where they were given little opportunities for discussion or to express their viewpoints. This is also reflected in teacher assessment, with regard to how teachers expect students to recall information for the test. The students felt that this type of assessment was even more problematic with standardized examinations, because they have no control over the content of the test, nor can they account for what they were not taught in their particular high schools. They cited language use and the wording of exam questions, and the fact that students have varying degrees of standardized test-taking skills, as current challenges with student evaluation. (p. 482)

In his study, Wiggan used a student-based inquiry research method (which he describes as mixed methods) to determine the meaning of school achievement among students who were African American and high performing. There were seven high school students who were the participants, each with a GPA of 3.0 or better, who were recipients of a merit-based scholarship. Unfortunately, this aspect of assessment may be increasingly important, especially in the standardization of AP courses and the content that needs to be taught in order for students to be successful on AP exams. The disconnect African American students may feel in the AP English classroom, especially in relation to a teacher-centered instruction and the impact of assessment, has not been investigated and further study is needed.

Many students, including African American students, may feel disengaged in today's classroom; therefore, several educational researchers (Finn and Rock, 1997; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001; Kuh, 2009; Sirin and Rogers-Sirin, 2004; Steele, 1992; Voelkl, 1997) have cited academic engagement as a catalyst for academic success. Defining student engagement goes beyond the scope of this literature review, but engaged learning primarily involves students in active learning environments with teachers using purposeful methodology and authentic assessments. Kuh (2009), a senior scholar and researcher for the National Institute for Learning Outcomes (NILOA) and author of over four hundred publications about institutional improvement, student engagement, and campus cultures, argues "engaging in educationally purposefully activities helps to level the playing field, especially [for students] from low-income family background and who have been historically underserved" (p. 689). Sirin and Rogers-Sirin's (2004) study, which examined the relationship between school

engagement, educational expectations, self-esteem, and parental factors, focused on 336 African American students through questionnaire response and interviews. Sirin and Rogers-Sirin found “for African American middle-class adolescents, educational expectations and school engagement have the strongest relationship to academic performance” (p. 334). In Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder’s (2001) study, which examined whether students from different ethnic groups differ in academic engagement and surveyed whether levels of engagement influenced academic outcomes above individual characteristics, they found that “African Americans adolescent are more actively engaged in classroom and school activities than any other [ethnic] groups, both in middle school and high school” (p. 334). They also found “minority students may feel more divorced from the academic processes of school” if they are not engaged in the learning process. Additionally, their findings are important since “much of the social concern about African Americans in school has often centered on their presumed lack of effort” (p. 334). If students who are African American and male find themselves in courses that are not engaging, students may find themselves not academically invested, which could influence pursuing AP courses and exams.

**Implications for this study.** Frequently, students who are African American and male may find that school-level obstacles prevent them from enrolling or successfully completing an AP English course. A poverty-stricken school or some financial issue, an over-reliance on student tracking or standardized test scores, scheduling problems, a lack of highly qualified teachers and cultural differences between teachers and students, and African American students’ perceptions of today’s school may all be significant factors in the marginalization of students who are African American and male from AP English



courses. Much of this research, again, points to the problems, not the solutions. One limitation in this educational research is the voice of students who have met with educational success who were from families classified as low SES or financially-strapped schools and districts. There also is a lack of student voice in research studies of African American students who meet with success when there are cultural and ethnic differences between themselves and their teachers. There are also few studies that present how students who are African American defied tracking and standardized testing barriers and enrolled in AP courses and successfully passed the exam. For this study, some of the participants have faced many of these hurdles, and some have faced only one—an ethnic or cultural difference between themselves and their AP English teacher, me. Therefore, in developing interview questions for this study, it was important to provide an opportunity for students to voice “their stories of success” despite these roadblocks.

### **Contextualizing Educational Norms as the Potential Gatekeepers**

Students who are African American and male may be prevented from finding success in an AP English classroom or successfully passing an AP English exam because of one or many school-related roadblocks. However, one of the other potential gatekeepers for students, which may also possibly affect their undergraduate pursuits, are the norms, especially in consideration of a school’s acceptance methods, in today’s U.S. secondary schools and colleges. Norms in U.S. public education are influenced by a variety of different factors, and have influenced participants in this study, their enrollment in AP English and their decision to take an AP English exam, which also, from their perspective, contributed to their enrollment in a college or university. For the participants in this study, I present their “story of success,” which continue into college

and life after high school; therefore, the implications of success on an AP English exam, the influence on students' acceptance to a college, and successful completion of college, is significant to address. As for secondary school norms, students who are African American and male simply may not have the same access as their peers to AP courses based on their districted school, which could limit their ability to enroll in AP courses and limit their potential for success. Both the number of AP courses offered and the number of students who sit for AP exams affect a school's prestige (a societal norm), which could limit the accessibility of AP classes and limit their potential to be accepted into colleges or universities that consider a school's prestige in the application process. Lack of access to AP courses could negatively affect college admission and limit success in college for students who are African American and male. These gatekeepers could considerably negate a student's ability in finding success in an AP English class, on an AP English exam, or influence future academic pursuits. For the purposes of contextualization, it is important to understand that these issues connected to school and social norms may affect students who are African American and male in general, but may not have necessarily affected all the participants in this study.

**School prestige.** One of the first barriers to equal access to AP courses could be a school's standing and reputation. A secondary high school's prestige can be based on the number of students who simply sit for an AP exam (not the passing rate), which is called the Challenge Index<sup>9</sup>. The Challenge Index, in 2001, was supported by the former Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, when he deemed "College entrance exams reveal that young people who take challenging classes, such as Advanced Placement courses,

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<sup>9</sup> The Challenge Index was devised by *The Washington Post's* columnist Jay Matthews as a process for rating high schools. The method ranks schools by the highest number of test takers—the number of AP exams divided by the number of students who graduate.

perform better than their peers regardless of their family or financial background” (The College Board, 2017). Since 2001, both the general public and educators have continued to use this index to label secondary schools as either “good” or “bad;” consequently, a school that simply has more students who take, not pass, an AP exam potentially could inflate a school’s status and position. Numerous individuals have an interest in the so-called *status* of a school—politicians, superintendents, school boards, real estate agents, property owners, universities, parents, teachers, and even the students themselves. The motives for increasing a school’s prestige are multifold—job security, career growth, financial benefit, or a potential edge in the college acceptance process. School prestige can be affected by these stakeholders, and if a student attends a school that is not labeled as “prestigious,” he or she may have limited opportunity to enroll in AP courses compared to their peers in high-status schools.

Additionally, reports generated on the ranking of “best” schools that gain a significant amount of media attention are the *U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek* annual articles that report on the U.S.’s “top” schools. Both the Challenge Index and these publications use AP test-taker numbers (not scores) as one of the main means of ranking high schools, which intimates that wealthier schools that can offer a significant amount of test taking opportunities for the highest number of students will accordingly be ranked the “best” (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Iatarola, Conger & Long, 2011). Many secondary schools that serve low-income students and/or minority students often do not offer as many AP courses as their counterparts, and even if AP courses are offered, research suggests that students who attend these schools are not as likely to enroll in AP classes (Iatarola et al., 2011; Klugman, 2013).

Students who attend the schools described as “ranking low” are at a severe disadvantage from their peers who attend prestigious schools because this may contribute to whether or not students gain acceptance to colleges and universities. This can be an obstacle for African American students who face inequalities in AP course offerings, because college application processes can be competitive. Students who attend a more prestigious school might be given a higher priority for acceptance during the application process (Cross, 2008; Iatarola et al., 2011; Klugman, 2013). This contention of students being given an advantage over students simply based on a school’s perceived status is inequitable, especially in minimizing the achievement gap.

Furthermore, schools that are the most prestigious tend to have more resources, more qualified teachers, and a greater ability to offer more course choices for students. Additionally, Barnard-Brak et al. (2011) argue student AP success in terms of enrollment by school has little to do with the percentage of students who are minority or receiving free lunch, but has much to do with students having access to AP courses. If students simply do not have access to these courses because the school they attend does not offer them or have the resources (such as a teacher who has the content knowledge to teach an AP Statistics course), then students cannot take the course when their counterparts at other schools may have that choice. The College Board (2017) reports that minority students have the least opportunities at their schools for enrolling in AP courses because the schools they attend typically have fewer offerings and less variation. Consequently, African American males can be marginalized simply due to the limited availability of course offerings.

**The school profile.** Another obstacle that may affect a student's acceptance in a college or university is his or her school's profile. Currently, many colleges and universities request transcripts from students during the application process that include a school profile. The profile often includes demographics—racial break downs, how many students qualify for free/reduced lunch, the number of English as a Second Language (ESOL) students, school size, teacher-student ratios, average/mean grade point averages (GPAs), description of the grading system (plus/minus, weighted, etc.), graduation rates, number of students who enroll in college/university, attendance rates, drop out rates, how many AP, IB, and honors classes are offered, average ACT/SAT scores, lists of clubs and sports, unique characteristics, and lists of former students and where they have attended college. These demographics listed in a school profile could possibly influence the subjective decision an admissions officer makes in whether or not to offer enrollment, which could be detrimental because it may merely be the school's profile that influences acceptance, not a student's true ability.

Furthermore, Black, Lincove, Cullinane, and Veron (2015), in their empirical study on the effects of high school quality and college performance, found that schools characterized as having more quality characteristics positively influenced college success and that the effects were even more pronounced for lower socio-economic students. Quality was measured by characteristics mentioned above in most schools' profiles, and included the number of students who were economically disadvantaged, percentage of students who take AP and SAT exams, average years of teacher experience, and per pupil funding. Interestingly, "quality" for this study also included a percentage of students who took an AP exam, but not the percentage of those who earned a score of 3 or higher. This

study was situated in Texas, and the researchers attempted to determine what contributed to students' success (measured by their freshman year GPA) when they were from low performing schools. The study focused on one university, The University of Texas. The researchers were able to track data using not only the applicants' personal data (as found in individual applications), but also the school's profile of the applicant. Most colleges and universities do largely use GPAs and aptitude assessments as benchmarks for acceptance; however, school prestige and profiles continue to influence not only the application process, but possibly college success as well. Consequently, students who have access to an AP English class and have the support to pass the AP exam may in fact have a better chance for college admission and achievement.

**Colleges perceive AP as a mark of distinction.** Another impediment for students is the impact AP courses have on college acceptance. Ford et al. (2008) maintain if "Black students do not participate in gifted education, especially AP classes, their chances to attend the more elite colleges and universities can be diminished, thereby contributing to the achievement gap in higher education" (p. 222). College admission officers often perceive AP courses as an indicator that students will be successful in the college classroom. The more AP courses students take in high school could indicate that students will be more likely to better handle the rigor of college material, which could contribute to the likelihood that colleges will accept potential candidates who carry more AP courses on their high school transcripts. Likewise, according to Klugman (2013), "AP courses are marks of distinction valued by selective colleges" and AP courses "help them [students] stand out in the application process" (p. 5).

Why would specifically taking AP English courses in high school help students gain acceptance to a college or university? Results of the College Board's 2007–08 annual survey confirmed the average number of high school course units (years of study) that colleges required and recommended for students interested in attending their institutions. On average, colleges required the most years of study in English (3.9), academic electives (3.3) and math (2.9) (Clinedinst et al., 2011). These data support the notion that colleges and universities value secondary study of English / Language Arts (ELA) because it is required by most schools that students need almost four complete years of study in this area even to be considered for enrollment. Indeed, these same colleges and universities could also find significance in students who challenge themselves with AP English courses and meet with success on an AP English exam.

**Potential to be accepted and to succeed in college.** In conjunction with a mark of distinction, The College Board, high schools, and colleges often consider enrollment and completion of an AP course as a gauge of possible student success in undergraduate courses; consequently, successful completion of AP courses is considered an indicator that students may be successful in a college environment. Therefore, another hurdle for students who do not enroll in an AP English class may be college acceptance and later collegiate achievement and a potential degree. According to Clinedinst et al. (2011), the top factors in the admission decision were (in order): grades in college preparatory courses, strength of curriculum, standardized admission test scores, and overall high school grade point average. The application essay and class rank placed fifth and sixth, followed closely by student's demonstrated interest in attending, counselor recommendations, and teacher recommendations. Potentially, if students are successful

in numerous AP courses, they could benefit in the college admissions process over students who have only a few or no AP courses on their high school transcript. Most colleges and universities perceive AP courses as a “mark of distinction,” which could be used to increase chances of acceptance during the application process (Klugman, 2013; Wolniak, Wells, Engberg, & Manly, 2016). In fact, Klopfenstein and Thomas (2009) found that the majority of schools considered AP course participation as the most “heavily valued” in the admissions process (p. 875).

On that same note, most colleges and universities consider GPAs one of the most significant predictors of college success, so it is often severely weighted when schools consider students for admission. Although the College Board does not mandate school systems to provide quality points for students who take AP courses, it is a common practice (College Board, 2017). Quality points are used by secondary schools to weigh AP courses more heavily than traditional courses, which is typically done by adding one point to the four-point GPA scale. Theoretically, students can take a substantial number of AP courses to increase their GPA, which could improve their chances for acceptance during the admissions process.

Furthermore, Klugman (2013) suggests that students from affluent communities have access to not only more AP courses, but also have the ability to take newer courses, which contributes to the options “that give students more flexibility to package their marks of distinction to colleges” (p. 6). This could even benefit students who may not be able to find success in classes considered rigorous (AP Physics), but may be able to find success in courses such as AP Art Studio or AP Human Geography. This practice contributes to the phenomenon of high school students “padding” their schedules with AP



courses that are not as necessarily demanding as other courses. However, many students are aware that during the college application process, colleges and universities may consider AP courses more challenging and give that student an advantage in admission over students who did not have the opportunity to take less rigorous AP courses because they simply were not offered.

Research also suggests that taking rigorous courses in high school is one of the most significant contributors for students' likelihood of completing college (Cross, 2008; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Handwerk, et al., 2008; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Warne et al., 2015). In Adelman's study (1999) of a national cohort of students' likelihood of earning a college degree, he found that students who take AP courses and exams are about 30% more likely to graduate from college and earn an undergraduate degree. Some research suggests that AP experiences "signal two important but difficult to measure personal characteristics: ability and motivation" (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009, p. 876). Disproportionate access to AP courses for students who are African American and male could undeniably affect this exclusionary practice and create a roadblock for these students on their path to higher education.

**Implications for this study.** In general, students who are African American and male may encounter gatekeepers that impede success—school prestige and profile, access to AP English courses, and potential college achievement. Again, the research in these implications chiefly report the inherent problems versus the voices who circumvent these gatekeepers. For the participants for this study, all did have the ability to enroll in AP Literature and Composition or AP Language and Composition; however, there were scheduling constraints which sometimes made this impossible for every student in the

building. For example, a popular course for male students at the school where I teach is an AP Economics course (enrollment since 2008 in this course has been at least 60% male), which is offered during the same period that AP English is scheduled. If a student preferred to enroll in the AP Economics course, he or she may not have room in his or her schedule to take AP English. Also, dual enrollment is encouraged by our administration, guidance counselors, and community. Dual enrollment is when twelfth grade students take one or two courses at a local community college in conjunction with a morning high school schedule. Students participating in dual enrollment often register for English 101, and forego taking a senior English course, which could be AP Literature and Composition.

Additionally, the school where I teach is in a county that “has been named among the best school districts in the nation, and the top district in the state of Maryland, according to rankings released this week by Niche.com, an education and community analysis firm” (\_\_\_\_\_ County Public Schools, 2017). Consequently, students here may have an advantage when applying to a college because the school system may be considered to have characteristics of prestige. However, although this public school may be considered prestigious—it is not the most prestigious in this geographical location. For example, in close proximity is the Sidwell Friends School (Washington D.C.), where Malia Obama (currently enrolled at Harvard University) and Chelsea Clinton (who graduated from Stanford University in 2001) attended. Barron Trump, the current president’s son, attends Saint Andrew’s Episcopal School (Potomac, Maryland), a school that considers itself “diverse” and sends all of its graduates to college, “including Ivy League Schools” (Saint Andrews Episcopal School, 2017). Besides not being one of the

more prestigious schools in the geographical area, the high school where I teach typically only runs about half (19 out of 38) the AP courses that could potentially be offered for students and only about half of our students (54.2%) are enrolled in an AP course (less than 50% sat for an exam). These statistics are higher than the national average and imply that most students at the school where I teach have access to many AP courses. The gatekeepers of school prestige for the participants of this study may be minimal, or hardly exist at all; however, they do exist for many students who are African American and male. For this literature review, they are important to address, since most participants reported that they believed college acceptance was due to the prestige of the public school they attended and reported that their parents purposefully chose housing in this particular district because their children would be able to attend “good schools.”

### **Race-Related Concerns for Success in AP English Courses**

Although school-level roadblocks and educational norms may prevent students from enrolling in AP English courses or passing an AP English exam, predominant ethnographic researchers in studying African American students have suggested that historical, societal, and cultural forces are among the more significant forces that contribute to underachievement and may prevent African American students from taking honors, gifted, and AP classes (Ford & Whiting, 2010; Ogbu, 2003). Additionally, researchers who focus on African American males and call for equity for under-represented students in advanced programs argue that students who are African American, male, and “gifted” or academically successful, are significantly influenced by their racial identity and understanding of race—especially in the area of attitude toward school, achievement, and motivation (Grantham & Ford, 2003, Ogbu 2003). For students

who are male and African American, racial identity, especially in the context of today's U.S. schools, may present some challenges, which may further be complicated by attempting to create an academic identity. Historically, racial identity has been a contested and controversial area of study due to conflicting theories and assumptions. Although pinpointing a clear definition of racial identity is beyond the scope of this literature review, the historical development of racial identity is important, complex, and include both sociological and psychological constructs. For the purposes of this study, African American racial identity will be broadly understood as being a citizen of the U.S. who identifies as African American or Black and has some level of understanding of the historical, social, and cultural implications of that identification. Racial identity and constructs may complicate the success students may experience in AP English courses—especially in the areas of being an involuntary minority, experiencing avoidance and resisting dominant culture, disengagement and disillusionment in schools, not being provided with a culturally relevant curriculum, feeling isolated from peers, attempting to “be cool” and masculine while avoiding being accused of “acting white” and other stereotypes, and the effects of media images and social media. Some of the participants did discuss race-related concerns in relation to AP English courses, and all discussed the importance of being successful in relation to their ethnicity. Most of the participants also remembered being one of the few or only student in the class who was African American and male. An interesting finding that also emerged in data analysis suggested that a culturally relevant curriculum was not a significant factor related to their success; however, all the participants indicated that literature they connected to had male characters with whom they could relate.

**Involuntary minority.** Although much of his research remains debated, Ogbu (1978) contends that African Americans are involuntary minorities, or minorities who found themselves to reside in the U.S. either against their will or against an ancestor's will, which creates opposition to the dominant culture. He also maintains that in the educational realm, this causes problems for African American students who are often stigmatized by the dominant culture, which often produces either defiant behavior and decreased motivation or the adoption and assimilation of the dominant culture (Ogbu 2003). After publication of their seminal text on involuntary minorities, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) studied students who were African American who attended a public high school in Washington D.C. and proposed that some African American students are not successful in school because of their "limited social and economic opportunities in adult life" (p. 178). They also found that poor performance was a response to the cultural aspect of being an "involuntary" minority who were merged into society through slavery (p. 178). Conversely, these researchers have met with some criticism, such as Foley (2010), who argues that race and ethnicity could be viewed as "subjective, and socially constructed" and that they "are never fixed or inherited" (para. 7). Despite criticism, Ogbu and Fordham are often cited for maintaining that historically, African American students have been given sub-par educational opportunities in comparison to their white peers and are not given the same career opportunities. In connection to their research, AP English courses remain predominantly white (The College Board, 2017). In their last report of statistical data in 2013, close to 60% of AP English exam-takers were white, and only 4.6% of African American students "successfully" earned a score of "3" or higher. The data reported by The College Board show students who are African

American and male in the graduating class of 2013 were the most underrepresented group in AP classrooms and in the population of successful AP exam takers. Therefore, students who are African American and male may, due to being an involuntary minority, defy being enrolled in an AP course, feel unmotivated to be successful, or suffer cultural consequences for succumbing to assimilation in a predominantly white classroom.

**Resisting dominant culture.** Additionally, ethnographers such as Fordham (1999) assert that some African American students simply use avoidance to oppose the dominant culture as a “primary weapon to maintain a perception of what it means to possess Black intellectual integrity” (p. 281). Avoidance is defined by Fordham as tardiness, truancy, refusing to participate, disobeying rules, not completing homework, not completing classwork, sleeping in class, refusing to complete outside projects, and choosing to work alone in collaborative activities (1999). If students want to avoid assimilation to white culture, they seemingly may elect not to take AP courses because they may have a white teacher and may have a predominantly white peer group in the class.

Recently, there has been opposition to the hypothesis that students who are African American avoid academic rigor. Some studies have shown that students who are African American are largely interested in achieving well in school (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005). In their study of eight North Carolina secondary high schools, the researchers analyzed interviews of students in AP and honors courses and other data and found African American students were “generally achievement oriented and that racialized peer pressure against high academic achievement is not prevalent in all schools” (Tyson, et al., 2005, p. 582). However, in a closer analysis of the data collected,

there were some glaring disparities. For example, one of the high schools had a 60% Black/African American population, but had 0% enrolled in an AP English course (compared to 17% enrolled in AP Calculus). Another high school in the study had a 39% Black/African American population, but only had 7% enrolled in an AP English course. Of the eight schools, four had students who were Black/African American as the majority of enrollment (which is not typical of most U.S. schools) and the researchers admit that a limitation to their study was that “patterns identified in this study suggest that institutional structures may shape how culture is enacted in school in response to a burden of high achievement among black students” and that “students in all racial and ethnic groups confront similar dilemmas of high academic achievement” (Tyson et al., 2005, p. 600). Although the study offered encouraging perspectives (being achievement oriented) of students who are African American, the study lacked generalizability to all students who are African American.

In Shujaa’s collection of essays *Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies* (1994), the author contends that schooling for African American students needs to shift in order to better meet the needs of African American students. Shujaa maintains that educators need to respect African American culture and embrace culturally relevant pedagogy, and that U.S. schools need to stop focusing on schooling that is “the process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society’s existing power relations and the institutional practices that support those arrangements” and instead focus on education that is “knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all the things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness” (p. 15). More recently, researcher and academic writer, Murrell, in his

book, *African-Centered Pedagogy: Developing Schools of Achievement for African American Children* (2012), argues for pedagogy shifts in today's U.S. public schools:

African American children, especially males, begin to disengage and lose enthusiasm for learning in school. They gradually give up expecting school to make sense in the context of their lives. African American children, more than their European American counterparts, begin to experience schools as places that merely control, coerce, and demand conformity, rather than as places that encourage learning, inspire creativity and enable thinking. This phenomenon of disconnection and disengagement is well documented by research that also shows that the longer Black children, particularly males, remain in school, the more their enthusiasm for learning and education achievement diminishes. (p. ix)

This disengagement for African American male students suggests that the process happens over a period of years and usually begins in elementary school. For example, Tucker, Zayco, Herman, Reinke, Trujillo, Carraway, and Ivery (2002) found in analyzing the data from a comprehensive questionnaire of 112 low-income African American children in grades 1 through 12, teacher interest and involvement heavily influenced student engagement and that most students begin their schooling engaged and interested in learning. It was only through years of teacher disengagement (not encouraging independent thinking, not caring or showing an interest in children, and not communicating clear expectations or giving feedback) that students lost emotional and intellectual engagement. The researchers found that the importance of teacher involvement, even when controlled by grade levels and self-esteem variables, countered their assumptions that it would not have a strong and direct effect on student engagement.



Tucker et al. suggest that teachers who do not show interest in their students “engender the cycle” and that engagement is critical for academic success (p. 486). Therefore, if students who are African American and male avoid and disengage with the dominant culture that often materializes in AP English courses, chances of meeting with success in these courses will be diminished.

Closely related to the idea of resisting dominant culture is the possibility of a bleak future regardless of effort in school. For students who are African American and male, there may be a feeling of disillusionment for future career opportunities regardless of educational pursuits, and these perceptions may influence students not to enroll in AP courses. Research has shown that “African American adolescents are not being prepared to enter the workforce at the same rates as adolescents from other groups” (Alliman-Brissett, Turner & Skovholt, 2004, p. 124). Moreover, the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2008) reported that “only 47% of African American males graduate from high school and that Black males are more chronically unemployed and underemployed, are less healthy, have access to fewer health care resources, die much younger, and are many times more likely to be sent to jail for periods significantly longer than males of other racial/ethnic groups” (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2008, p. 3) While educational and career options were unavailable to African Americans in previous eras, today, educational and career opportunities abound, yet many young African Americans are not in a position to take advantage of these opportunities (Alliman-Brissett et al., 2004, p. 124). Therefore, students who are African American and male may be disenchanting and dissatisfied with their perceived opportunities, and may not find value in AP courses.

**The absence of culturally relevant curriculum.** Although some of the researchers discussed earlier propose that African American students create an oppositional identity, other pedagogical theorists and education experts assert that African American students thrive in culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching, which roots pedagogy in the context of culture with the aim to help students excel (Delpit, 2012; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Bilings, 1995; Tatum, 2008). However, a culturally relevant curriculum may be absent in most AP English classrooms, since AP teachers need to have their course syllabi approved by The College Board and need to follow a suggested reading list. Also, especially in the AP Literature and Composition course, The College Board “stipulates that students in a strong AP English Literature and Composition curriculum should read works from several genres and periods—from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first century” (College Board, 2018). However, according to the 2014 (last released) *English Literature and Composition: Course Description*, a list of poets, essayists, and authors was “provided to simply suggest the range and quality of reading expected to the course” (p. 10). Below is a sample of poets suggested (underlined authors are modern or contemporary African American writers):

Poetry: W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, William Blake, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Browning, George Gordon, Lord Byron, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Geoffrey Cahucer, Lucille Clifton, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Billy Collins, Hilda Doolite, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Rita Dove, Paul Laurence Dunbar (died in 1906), T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Joy Harjo, Seamus Heaney, George Herbert, Garrett Hongo, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Langston Hughes (died 1967), Ben Johnson, John Keats, Philip Larkin, Robert Lowell,

Andrew Marvell, John Milton, Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath, Edgar Allan Poe, Alexander Pope, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Leslie Marmon Silko, Cathy Song, Wallace Stevens, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Derek Walcott, Walt Whitman, Richard Wilbur, William Carlos Williams, William Wordsworth, William Bulter Yeats.

Of all the poets suggested, only five are African American, only two are male, and none would be considered contemporary. In the suggested dramatists to study, Lorraine Hansberry, Suzan-Lori Parks, and August Wilson (died 2005) are the only African Americans (p. 11). The fiction and expository prose suggestions do not offer much more in the terms of culturally relevant texts to today's student who is African American and male—at best, the College Board suggests Ralph Ellison (died 1994), Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Richard Wright (died 1987) (p.11). The entire list does not include one writer who is African American and male and contemporary. Thus, the AP Literature and Composition course would undoubtedly not be considered culturally relevant to the educators and researchers who promote this type of education for students who are African American.

Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). She also argues that teacher relationships, student motivation, and the ability of the teacher to recognize that strengths of individual students trump all aspects in improving education for African American students; thus, culturally relevant pedagogy provides “a way for students to

maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (p. 476). In Ladson-Billings’s observation and study of exemplary teachers of students in low-income, mostly African American school districts and classrooms, she found that students must experience academic success, develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. Ladson-Billings maintains that this is imperative for African American students who continue to be underserved in U.S. public schools. Delpit (2012), a prominent African American educational researcher and writer proposes that educators need to create instruction that is engaging and rigorous and situated within a student’s cultural, intellectual, and historical legacies. Delpit found that this is especially true for students who are male and African American, and suggests educators’ work “provide a culturally relevant curriculum that centralizes, rather than marginalizes, the complete experience of urban young men” (p. 163). Gay (2010), in her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, also supports Ladson-Billings’s and Delpit’s contentions of increasing achievement for African American students through a culturally relevant pedagogy. Gay argues that all students can be successful if teaching is framed within students’ own cultures. She also stresses that “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students make learning more relevant and effective” (p. 182). Additionally, “the high levels of low achievement [are] too devastating to be tolerable” (p. 1)

Although a culturally relevant pedagogy, in general, would seem to benefit African American students, Tatum (2008), a literacy expert and researcher on reluctant African American male readers, argues that students who are African American and male

continue to be the most vulnerable students because educators continue to rely on antiquated practices that are negatively impacting their literacy development. He maintains that “there is an urgent need to address both the literacy needs and life outcomes of African American male adolescents in order to improve the conditions of these young men in school and society” (p. 162). He also advocates that students who are African American and male need to be presented with texts that are personally and culturally relevant to their own context. Furthermore, in his book *A Culturally Responsive Approach to Literacy Teaching* (2005), he contends:

For black adolescent males, in order to offset resistance that occurs because of cultural difference and to help develop their identities, it is essential to establish cultural responsive instructional practices and infuse the curriculum with cultural responsive materials. In this way, these young men will not view their lived experiences outside of school as being marginalized inside of it. (p. 75)

Culturally relevant pedagogies and literacy development may combat student resistance because they connect with a student’s own culture as a student’s identity is an important aspect of childhood development. Unfortunately, as discussed, culturally relevant pedagogy and literacy experiences typically only exist in a vacuum for students in an AP English class.

Although research has demonstrated that some African American students may use oppositional avoidance in the classroom, other research asserts that issues, such as a lack of engagement and a deficiency of culturally relevant pedagogy, are contributing to the achievement gap of students who are African American and male. Certainly, there are connections that can be made to the AP English classroom where several problems

could be at play. Students who are African American and male may believe that an AP English class has little to offer in terms of being culturally relevant. Students may think the course focuses on studying “dead, white guys.” In an ethnographic study on the implementation of multi-cultural texts by Bigler and Collins (1995), the researchers found that most English teachers (especially gifted and talented) believe that multi-cultural literature is important; however, the emphasis needs to remain on the “good” or “classic” literature, which are the texts that stand the test of time—mostly limited to the “dead, white guys.” Although this study was conducted over twenty years ago, there is still an emphasis on the classics in today’s U.S. ELA classrooms. For example, Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2006), in their study on teacher perspectives on using multicultural literature found the most frequently taught novels in ELA classes in high schools in the U.S. are *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Crucible*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Our Town*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The most modern of the texts, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960—over forty years before today’s high school student was even born. Additionally, the three texts that even include African American characters are placed within the context of a racist, American society. *To Kill a Mockingbird* highlights how an unjust court system accuses an innocent African American man of raping and beating a white woman. *Huck Finn* features an African American character, Jim, who is escaping from slavery, and literary critics often reference Jim’s character as promoting slave stereotypes. Additionally, both novels are criticized for the frequent use of the racial slur, “nigger,” which may promote class discussion and situations that make students uncomfortable. And, *A Raisin in the*

*Sun*, focuses on an African American family trying to “better” themselves, which is all in relation to insurance money left to the family after a relative’s death. Although AP teachers may use these novels and plays in the classroom and think they are providing students with a “multi cultural” curriculum and providing African American students with a voice, these three texts may actually negate the whole idea of culturally relevant pedagogy. Where are the stories of success? Where is the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*? *The Souls of Black Folk*? *Up From Slavery*? or *The Autobiography of Malcom X*? Where are contemporary voices, such as Terry McMillan, Stephen Carter, Octavia Butler, or Z. Z. Packer?

Certainly, culturally relevant curricula programs may increase engagement, literacy, achievement, and an understanding of self, especially in English courses, where students are often the audience to another’s “story.” However, if an AP English course, and the teacher who teaches the course, still rely on antiquated texts and do little to embrace a culturally relevant curriculum, there may be little to do to negate the marginalization of students who are African American and male from this course.

**Feelings of minoritization.** Researchers argue African Americans students may choose not to be in gifted or AP classes because of negative peer pressure and social isolation from their peer groups (Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009; Ford & Harris, 1996; Ford & Whiting, 2010; Saunders & Maloney, 2005; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). These research teams suggest that minoritized students (people who are minoritized face ill-treatment, oppression, and marginalization due to circumstances beyond their control) may be pressured from friends and family members to not take gifted and talented or AP courses because there is a stigma against academic success.

Saunders and Maloney label this feeling of marginalization by using the term “sellouts,” which is defined as people “who were willing to give up their cultural identity to fit into the majority population” (p. 2).

Furthermore, African Americans may also feel isolated, alienated, and unwanted by white students in AP classes (Bruce et al., 2009; Ford & Harris, 1996; Tyson et al., 2005). If students have difficulties finding a peer in the class to act as a support system, students may feel estranged from their classmates and choose to be in classes where their peer group is larger. Notably, African American students in particular find classroom environments to be important, especially when forming teacher/student and peer relationships. Ford and Harris allege that these relationships are “part of the chain of variables that lead to a negative self-fulfilling prophecy for minority students” (p. 1142). Edwards, Thompson-McMillon, and Turner (2010), in their book on transforming literacy education for African American students, discuss the idea of these students typically having two types of issues with interactions and relationships with their teachers in classrooms—spotlighting and ignoring. Spotlighting implies that teachers position African American students where they might not necessarily be comfortable, such as asking students to be a voice for an ethnicity and/or race. Conversely, some teachers can ignore students who are African American and employ colorblindness or other derogatory and prejudice behaviors. Rejection from white peers and spotlighting/ignoring can be detrimental to success in AP English courses and hold students back from reaching academic success and developing literacy.

**Being cool.** Edwards, McMillon, and Turner (2010) contend that “African American students may make the decision to pursue a cool social identity rather than



academic achievement” (p. 65). For the purposes of this literature review, the term “cool” will be defined as described by Connor in *What is Cool? Understanding Black Manhood in America* (1995). Connor’s definition of *cool* is that it is an attitude supported by family, friends, and peers and that within those groupings it connotes desirable meanings. She also defines it as a fundamental code of behaviors and attitudes that underpin an often ignored role in shaping the conception of manhood among young African American boys; “[C]ool, at its most basic, is a way of living and surviving in an inhospitable environment, a rational reaction to an irrational situation, a way of fitting in while standing out, of gaining respect while instilling fear” (Connor, 1995, p. 17). Close to twenty years have passed since her work has been published, but the definitional aspects of being cool have remained the same for students who are African American and male. Although a cool identity might have a perceived favorable social effect, being cool may threaten a student’s academic achievement. Edwards, Thompson-McMillon, and Turner (2010) note “in contrast to White middle-class kids, and others who are attracted to cool culture, African American students do not have the social safety nets and structures to mitigate the negative consequences of these cool behaviors, which ultimately can destroy their academic careers” (p. 66).

Coolness too, certainly can be connected to African American literacies. Kirkland and Jackson (2009) found in studying black masculine literacies that “coolness [is] marked by black pop culture and African American language,” which typically would not be found in literary analysis instruction in an AP English classroom (p. 287). The College Board (2017) recommends to AP English teachers that a significant amount of instructional time should be spent on teaching students literary and rhetorical analysis. In

addition, AP teachers must have their course syllabi approved by the College Board who deems “your course should help students become skilled readers of prose written in a variety of disciplines and rhetorical contexts, and become skilled writers who compose for a variety of purposes, aware of the interactions among a writer’s purposes, audience expectations and subjects” and that “students enrolling in AP English are expected to have had training in reading and writing Standard English” (The College Board, 2018). In fact, since 1981, there have only been three African American authors who have been used on the literary analysis section of the writing portion on the AP Language and Composition exam—Zora Neale Hurston, Martin Luther King, and two passages from Frederick Douglass. Although these writers are central in African American history and literacy development, the “coolness” of these figures may be absent for today’s contemporary student.

Kirkland and Jackson (2009) also found that African American males are subjected to “this pressure that young black men face to choose between a mainstream and fringe world, between race and educational rights, we argue, is the force motivating black masculine literacies—literacy as practice by the cool kids” (p. 294). They also found that “the young men [in their study] also practiced literacy to push themselves apart, away from the threatening and uncool individuals and groups. In doing so, the young men critiqued the world around them” (p. 294). In an AP English class, students are expected (as required by the College Board) to utilize Standard English, which some teachers may expect all students to speak and write in when they are in class or completing writing assignments—which could possibly be “uncool” to a student who is African American and male. Kirkland and Jackson, in their research, also found that for

students who were African American and male, their “language was pragmatic as opposed to flowery. This pragmatism was essential for performing male identities and constructing cool” (p. 294). One of learning objectives in mostly all ELA classes is to actually include the study of “flowery” language and its paramount importance when studying and analyzing poetry. Additionally, students are continually asked to expand on their ideas and to develop stylistically advanced writing skills—everything the *opposite* of pragmatic. Consider the Common Core objective for Reading Standards in English Language Arts Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

**“Acting White” and masculinity.** Accusing African American students of “Acting White”<sup>10</sup> is one of the most degrading forms of negative peer pressure, which students who are African American and male might be subjected to if enrolled in an AP English class. This is especially true for males who “often adopt ‘cool pose’ persona—nonchalant, tough, hostile, emotionless, and uncaring—to save face and to cope with external pressure and oppression” (Whiting, 2009, p. 225). Since “Acting White” is often associated with academic success, this phenomenon may contribute to African American males rejecting academic experiences that are considered rigorous and challenging,

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<sup>10</sup> This term describes a “set of social interactions in which Black students ridicule other Black students for investing in behaviors deemed characteristic of Whites (e.g., speaking standard English, raising a hand in class, or making good grades)” (Ford & Whiting, 2010, p. 135).

which students would expect to encounter in an AP English class (Tyson et al., 2005; Whiting, 2006). Ford, Grantham, & Whiting (2008) contend:

White is viewed as someone who has betrayed his or her racial group, has given up his or her racial or cultural ties, and has adopted the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the oppressor or enemy. This type of peer pressure (charges of acting White) seems to be effective at hindering too many Black students from taking full advantage of certain academic opportunities available to them, including opportunities to participate in gifted education. (p. 222)

This problematic social construct may stem from the idea developed by Fordham and Ogbu (1986):

White Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as white people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in academic striving, i.e. from 'acting white.' (p. 177)

Fordham and Ogbu, in their seminal article previously discussed, propose that African American students do not attempt to earn high grades or gain academic success because it is viewed by others as "acting White." Ogbu's early research focused on why minority students did not perform as well in school than white students. He conducted two studies—one in the U.S. (California) and one internationally. His findings suggest that minorities often were classified into subordinate groups, which did not grant them equality in education. Later (1986), with Fordham, Ogbu argues that identity is part of

the academic process and can affect academic achievement. The researchers situated their study within the context of Washington D.C. and found that students who were African American felt fearful of being accused of “acting White.” These fears, in turn, led to both an internal and social condition, which negatively affected effort in academics. These negative social interactions may be a contributing factor to why African American males continue to be underrepresented in AP courses. Although criticism against Fordham and Ogbu abounds, such as a fixed understanding of race/ethnicity versus a socially constructed understanding and focusing on students, peers, and community over teachers and student teacher relationships, contentions they make through their research may be accurate for some students who are African American and male.

African American students do not face only criticism from their peers, they can encounter pressure from family members to “who, in some cases, attach a stigma to their academic success” (Saunders & Maloney, 2005, p. 54). Anxiety for students who may be viewed as a “sellout” from family and friends for giving up their cultural and/or ethnic identity can be problematic for students. This could especially be true for students in AP English courses where speaking and writing in Standard American English (SAE) is preferred (see the *Language Barriers and Code Switching* section for further discussion). In a study by Fordham (1999), close to 80% of respondents cited “speaking the standard English dialect as an ‘acting White’ behavior,” which would be expected in

an AP English class (p. 279). Edwards, Thompson-McMillon, and Turner (2010) argue:

A significant number believe they must choose whether they will be successful in the academic realm or in the realm of the cultural community. For these African American students, success in the academic realm means ‘acting White’ and acquiring and enacting specific behaviors, norms and conventions that are received as consonant with ‘White or mainstream’ culture. (p. 71)

Male students also face pressures that their female counterparts may not necessarily face. Besides facing pressure from peers to not “Act White,” these students may also be challenged by the perception that “being a high achiever and being intelligent is not masculine or is otherwise feminine” (Whiting, 2009, p. 226). Young (2014), a researcher on language and writer on her sociolinguistic concept of “code-meshing” language and AAL, believes African American males show a lack of interest in their education because they understand “that mainstream, middle-class success requires a racial and gender subordination” (p. 467). This could be particularly true for AP English courses, where male students may consider reading novels and studying poetry “feminine.” These attacks on personal identity could contribute to decreased motivation for African American males to have high academic pursuits. Males who have their gender identity questioned could deter academically challenging coursework because it may threaten their self-perception and lower self-efficacy.

Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) and Ferguson’s (2003) research of students utilizing oppositional culture and “acting white” to reject academic achievement received popular attention in education and research, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. However, since then, there have been some studies that have refuted their conclusions. For example,

Tyson et al. (2005) found that all students in the North Carolina schools they studied had similar attitudes about school achievement, that both African American students and white students wanted to be successful in school, and that both groups had high levels of self-esteem when they were successful. In their study, which they suggest was inspired by Fordham and Ogbu, “Black Students’ School Success: Coping with the ‘Burden of Acting White’” they reference Fordham and Ogbu’s work as one of “the most influential publications addressing the academic achievement of black students and the black-white achievement gap” (p. 582). In their study, the researchers examined the underrepresentation of minority students in AP and honors classes in public schools throughout the state of North Carolina. They attempted to determine whether an oppositional culture exists in schools. They used detailed data analysis, surveys, and interviews and found the many of the African Americans in their study did not take advanced class because they had a fear of not being successful.

However, more recently, Fryer and Torelli (2010) have found that “even after taking into account many factors that affect student popularity, evidence remains strong that acting white is a genuine issue” in schools today. In Fryer’s (2006) empirical research study, which utilized a sample of more than 90,000 junior-high and high-school students from 175 schools in 80 communities around the U.S., he found in certain school contexts (such a public over private and majority African American) “acting white” had a statistically significant effect. Interestingly, he found the most problems in highly integrated schools:

Unfortunately, internal integration only aggravates the problem. Blacks in less-integrated schools (places with fewer than expected cross-ethnic friendships)

encounter less of a trade-off between popularity and achievement. In fact, the effect of acting white on popularity appears to be twice as large in the more-integrated (racially mixed) schools as in the less-integrated ones. Among the highest achievers (3.5 GPA or higher), the differences are even more stark, with the effect of acting white almost five times as great in settings with more cross-ethnic friendships than expected. Black males in such schools fare the worst, penalized seven times as harshly as my estimate of the average effect of acting white on all black students. This finding, along with the fact that I find no evidence of acting white in predominantly black schools, adds to the evidence of a “Shaker Heights” syndrome, in which racially integrated settings only reinforce pressures to toe the ethnic line. (p. 57)

Although Fryer’s (2006) and Fryer and Torelli’s (2010) study on measuring the idea of social status in comparison to academic achievement is not able to offer definitive conclusions, their research does show that there is potentially a relationship. In light of students who are African American and male, they found that these students “fare the worst,” which could continue to diminish the chance for students who are African American and male to meet with success in the AP English classroom.

**Stereotypes and negative media images.** Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer (2003), researchers on the structural conditions that affect African American males, contend that African American males are the most stereotyped group in the United States. Stereotypes can have negative implications for those that are stereotyped against, especially when the stereotypes are negative and are in schools. Steele and Aronson (1995) and Steele (1997) refer to this phenomenon as *stereotype threat*, which Steele



(1997) describes as “the event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant, usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one’s self-definition” (p. 616). Stereotype threat can become a phenomenon that is limiting for students because it does not help students identify with their schools, peers, and teachers. Stereotypes, too, can become internalized and can be more harmful than we are aware. Some researchers (Bruce et al., 2009; Steele, 1997, Steele & Aronson, 1995) have suggested that stereotype threats can be more damaging to confident students who have found some academic success. Bruce et al. argues stereotypes can have the most detrimental effects on these students because it typically “should have its greatest effect on the better, more confident students in stereotyped groups [...] —those who are in the academic vanguard of their group” (p. 617).

Allen (2015), in his research on teachers and their educational experiences with African American males, found teachers often drew from their structural and cultural understanding of African American youth when attempting to understand their academic successes and failures. In his study, he found that racist and stereotyped perceptions of African American males continue to exist and that teachers tended to favor families from middle-class background where parents were “more visible” (p. 75). Stereotypes of African American males could potentially obstruct students from the AP English classroom and continue to influence their marginalization.

The media are among the more powerful tools in the U.S. that influence popular opinions, enforce stereotypes, and disseminate information. There are many influences on African American males—cultural, political, social, familial, and historical—but only

through the media is the portrayal of these men reinforced to the public every day. The public's opinion is important because opinions, perceptions, views, and attitudes can affect advancement in U.S. society and can influence educational policy. Additionally, much of what we see and hear in the media greatly influences social realities.

The media infrequently present positive images of high-achieving, academically involved males who are African American. In its place, “viewers and readers are bombarded with images of crime, violence, drugs, sexual exploitation, and educational disdain” (Ford & Whiting, 2010, p. 137). These narrow representations of African American men have significant harmful effects on how young African American males shape their identities and understand themselves in respect to their culture and gender.

Researchers (Ford et al., 2008; Ogbu, 2003) argue that as African American males progress in their education, they are not as academically engaged, have learned to devalue school and education, and reject schools as a place to develop their identities. In its place, “we see Black males thriving in the sports and entertainment industries—areas they view as pathways to guaranteed recognition, respect, and large sources of income” (Whiting, 2006). Research also suggests (Ford & Whiting, 2010) that African American males handle social injustices by finding cultural and ethnic identities outside of schools because if they are not successful in an academic setting “there is little loss of worth and dignity” (p.145).

Popular media, too, ha[ve] a long history of promoting harmful images:

For decades, mass media outlets have portrayed Black males along a continuum that can be described as implicitly stereotypical (at best) to overtly racist (at worst). For example, the image of successful Black male entertainers and athletes

is as common popular discourse as is the portrayal of them as dangerous criminals and hypersexed misogynists. (Henfield, 2012, p. 179)

Some researchers even contend “negative Black male images seem to have evolved into a structural entity that may, unfortunately, never cease to exist” (Henfield, 2012, p. 181). Frighteningly, if these images and projections are forced down the proverbial throats of society, not only will young African American males continue to internalize these stereotypes, but everyone else will also continue to widen these stereotypes. Television might have the worst effect, researchers on African American boys and media influences maintain, “since blacks tend to watch the more television overall, and tend to be especially attuned to representation of blacks (who are often framed negatively), their attitudes toward the people and community around them is negatively impacted, relative to white viewers (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011, p. 29). Gordon (2016) found in her research on media influences that few studies examined connections between multiple forms of media use (television and music) and academic achievement of students who are African American. However, in Gordon’s particular study, she discovered that African American “youth who watched more television, listened to music more often, and identified more strongly with stereotypical media personalities” had “lower grades in their classes, lower perceptions of their ability to do well in science, and less interest in careers that require a college education” (p. 214). Other researchers too (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, 2014) agree that television viewing is the most popular medium for African American youth and argue that “Black youth who watch a lot of media are exposed to a high volume of images that often project negative stereotype messages about Black people” (p. 383). In relation to male youth over female youth, “males were

less likely to identify negative media stereotypes, and more likely to endorse the negative messages than females” (Adams-Bass et al., 2014, p. 384).

More contemporary research by Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2015) documents the idea that although slowly changing, African American males continue to be stereotyped on television programming, and that white audiences are often influenced by what they view on television. Remarkably, Tukachinsky et al. found that when

controlling for demographic variables, the prevalence of hyper-sexualized Black and Latino characters was associated with more negative attitudes toward Blacks and Latinos in the United States. Conversely, as more Blacks and Latinos on television occupied high social and professional status, White Americans tended to hold more favorable views of these social groups. These results illuminate the importance of improving the quality of representations of ethnic minorities, rather than merely increasing the sheer number of these characters in the media. (p. 21)

Music too can have an influence on young males who are African American and others who are exposed to the hip hop or rap style of music that is attributed to African American urban youth in the 1970s. Through the abundance of commercials, YouTube videos, music videos, Disney movies—hip hop music is all-pervading. Love (2015) argues:

Hip Hop music and culture is the primary tool for the distortion of hyper Black masculinity. The commercialization of Hip Hop is one of the primary spaces where Black masculinity is constructed and rooted in the Eurocentric psyche and imagination in that the hegemonic images disseminated by rap music are rooted in centuries of Black males being cast as Black brutes. (p. 341)

Love, and others, have studied how hip hop culture and its connection to African American youth may influence public perception in a negative way, which may find itself manifested in U.S. classrooms.

**Social media.** Besides unfavorable and stereotyped portrayals in television, film, music, and sports, social media and cell phone use could also have an effect on students' who are African American achievement. The rise of cell phones and social media has mostly been researched in college students and outside the U.S.; consequently, the research on high school students who are African American and their use of cell phones and social media has rarely been considered. In some more recent research, Lee (2014), in her investigation on social media and texting on African American and Latina/o students, found that African American teenagers "preferred text messaging to phone conversations," preferred "peer communication" that utilized "newer technologies," considered themselves "strikingly attached to their phones," and spent "more time on Facebook activities than studying" (p. 96). More research on the effects of social media on academic performance is needed, but undoubtedly, social media have an impact on students today. According to a Pew research study in 2016, over 90% of teenagers are on social media (up 78% from the 12% reported in 2005). And, social media is constantly changing, which makes studying the effects of different platforms difficult. For example, where Facebook was once the dominant platform for teenagers, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat have surpassed that particular venue (Pew, 2016).

Although there are limitations on the research of social media, more than half of the U.S. population use social media as their source of news (Pew, 2016). Research contends that minority ethnic groups "are more frequent media users than whites" and

“are more likely to consider the content of the media as real” (Fujioka, 2005, p. 450). In Gilens’s (1996) research on race, poverty, and media, he found that African Americans were disproportionately represented as poor on television news and weekly magazines. Additionally, Clawson and Trice (2000), in their research on media portrayals of the poor found that “magazines overrepresented the black, urban, and nonworking poor” and “Blacks were especially prominent in stories on unpopular poverty topics” (p. 61). They acknowledge that their research focused on magazines, which “is a very different medium than television,” but “it is certainly possible that magazine photos capture the audience’s attention in the same way as television visuals” (p. 62). Adams-Bass et al. (2014) acknowledge that it has become common knowledge that there are negative media images of African Americans, which impact perceptions and maintain stereotypes, and again, can manifest in U.S. public schools.

Over the last decade, with the escalation of social media, much attention has been given over using excessive and unnecessary force and the killing of African American men who were unarmed by police. For example, in 2009 in California, a fight broke out on a crowded train. Oscar Grant was arrested by police and was forced to lie down and his arm got trapped under his body. An officer could not remove his arm, and Grant ended up getting shot in the shoulder and died the following morning. In 2012, in Florida, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was walking home from a convenience store, got in a supposed altercation with a man on neighborhood watch, and was shot by that man who claimed self-defense. In 2014, in New York, Eric Garner died by being put in a chokehold by a police officer, which is illegal, while police were arrested him for unlawfully selling cigarettes. Also in 2014, in Missouri, Michael Brown was fatally shot

for allegedly robbing a convenience store for cigarillos. In 2015 in Maryland, Freddie Gray was arrested for possessing a switchblade, and was transported to the police station in a police vehicle, where allegedly he received spinal cord injuries from which he later died. These instances led to several peaceful protests and also not-so-peaceful protests. In response to Michael Brown's death, there were several days of protest, which was covered by national media and led to a national discussion of local police using military grade weapons. In response to Freddie Gray's death, there were major protests in downtown Baltimore, which led to over thirty arrests, looting, and the burning of a pharmacy. The governor declared a state of emergency, and the Maryland National Guard was deployed and a city-wide curfew was enacted. Most of these incidents were caught on cell phones and released to nation-wide audiences through television news venues and social media. Additionally, in 2016, Philando Castile was in a car with his girlfriend and her young daughter. He was pulled over by the police, and shot, even after admitting he had a firearm (which he had a license to carry) in the car. The incident was recorded on a cell phone by his girlfriend (who released the video on Facebook) and also was recorded on a police dash-cam video. The officer who shot Castile was charged with three felonies, later acquitted of all charges, and then fired by the police department. The public's reaction to these deaths provided controversy because there was concern of the use of force against African Americans.

Additionally, activist movements, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), fights against violence, police brutality, and racism against African Americans. Movements like these have grown quickly and momentously through social media. BLM started because of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter that frequented social media after Trayvon

Martin's shooter was acquitted. Besides social media, many news outlets have been criticized for sensationalizing the deaths of African American men and using bystanders' videos. Furthermore, "Joe Scarborough, a former Republican Congressman and MSNBC talk show host, accused the media of sourcing unreliable witnesses to sensationalize the narrative in a way the further infuriated the protesters and intensified their anger against police" (Elmasry and el-Nawawy, 2016, p. 1). These cases sparked national dialogue about publicized accounts of young African American men, how these men are treated by people in positions of power, and how the media played a part in and influenced what the public perceived. News and media influence how people think and perceive others; therefore, the media, even if in only a slight way, influence how people think and understand race, ethnicity, culture, and racism. The effects of these incidents are just beginning to be studied, but these stories have undoubtedly reached most of the U.S. public and are discussed by students and their teachers in U.S. public schools. It could be possible that these incidents create more racial division, which could influence understanding of race and ethnicity by potential AP gatekeepers.

Although negative reporting and media stereotypes may weigh heavy in most studies on the perception of African Americans in media, some researchers have found that there has been change. For example, Elmasry and el-Nawawy (2016) found in their study of major U.S. newspapers that newspapers "provided sympathetic coverage of 'Black Lives Matter' protests that erupted following the police-perpetrated killing of unarmed black teenage Michael Brown" (p. 14). The researchers propose that the media have become more concerned with African American portrayal since the substantial media coverage of the killings of unarmed African American men from 2013-2015



represented these men as “victims” and “public anger at these instances of apparent police overreach was palpable” (p. 15). Regardless of the label of the portrayal of these young, African American men, they are often shown as dying or as dead. A high school student consuming this media may sense that their lives do *not* matter, so why would it matter what they do in school? If a young man supposes he can be gunned down in broad daylight by police, why should they trust teachers or educators, or even try to be successful in school at all? These types of studies are emergent; however, negative stereotypes of all cultures, ethnicities, genders, geographic regions, etc. can be found in today’s media. Therefore, students who are African American and male may continue to be underrepresented in AP courses because of these stereotypes that are strengthened by negative media images.

**Implications for this study.** For the participants in this study, unlike the first section of this literature review that focused on school-level implications and educational norms, most, if not all of these issues connected to race, were reported by the participants to be influential in their academic achievement and literacy development. Some even shared impacts of race-related concerns on later academic success. There has been much research devoted to the study of students who are African American and male underachieving in school because of being an involuntary minority, resisting dominant culture, feeling disillusioned, being accused of “Acting White,” and feeling their masculinity threatened. However, there have been few research studies that give voice to students who despite this, succeed in school and do well on AP exams.

### **The Influence of Parents and Family**

Parental involvement has long been advocated as a benefit to students in a multitude of areas in schools—absenteeism, behavior, and academic achievement. Parental involvement, for the purposes of this literature review, is the amount of support that parents give to their child’s education, growth, and development. This incorporates learning in the classroom, learning outside the classroom (such as helping with homework, reading at home, or visiting a zoo) participating in school functions, attending meetings, joining committees (such as the PTSA), and maintaining communication with teachers and administration. Students who are African American and male may benefit from positive parental involvement by encouraging or advocating for enrollment in AP English courses, offering support, and increasing literacy development. Possible success may also be influenced by the gender perspectives and issues African American parents may have when raising their children. Also, the family structure may impact a child’s academic achievement. For this study, the parents of the participants’ perceptions will not be a part of this research study; however, the *perceptions* of the participants of their parents, parental involvement, and family structure are addressed. For all the participants, family influence was frequently cited as a catalyst to their future success.

**Family structure.** The family structure may impact a child’s trajectory in educational pursuits. The definition of *family* is dynamic, loaded, and ever-changing. In the past, one might have simply defined *family* as a mother and a father, who biologically gave birth to children. In today’s understanding, a family could constitute a man and woman who have no children, or a child who has two mothers, or a child who is adopted by someone who does not have the same ethnicity or race as him or her, or a child who is

being raised by her grandmother, or a parent who is transgender. The idea of a traditional family in the U.S. has been changing dramatically over the past twenty years, and the impact of familial structure on student achievement goes beyond the scope of this literature review. However, there are some potential familial road blocks for students who are African American and male because of possible deterrents to academic achievement.

Research focusing on the problems faced by students who are African American in school often address the household structure, such as the presence or absence of a father in a child's upbringing. There have been studies (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, McCrary, Hastings & Conyers, 1994; Jeynes, 2005) proposing that having a two-parent family has a positive effect on a child's academic performance, and that living with one parent leads to negative outcomes. Some early research on African American families and education pointed to working mothers, broken homes, poverty, or the low educational attainment of parents as being disadvantageous for students who were African American. However, more contemporary research by Clark (2015) demonstrates "it is the overall *quality* of the family's life-style, not the composition, or status, or some subset of family process dynamics, that determines whether children are prepared for academically competent performance in the classroom" (p. 1). In his book *Family Life and School Achievement: Why Poor Black Children Succeed or Fail*, Clark argues that children are successful in school because of the influence of their parents' disposition and parents' relationships with their children. In his study, he immerses himself into ten African American families in Chicago, and finds that "family habits and interactions affect school success and that characteristics of family life provide children

with ‘school survival skills,’ a complex of behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge that are essential elements in academic success” (p. 248).

The idea of an absent father or unmarried mother possibly having an effect on a student’s scholastic achievement can be negated through individual stories of success and positive familial relationships. Although students may not have both biological parents involved in their lives, it does not mean that students can not achieve well in school. There are many cases, which have been told, where children flourish in school without living with a traditional understanding of “parents.” However, some contemporary research suggests (Franklin & James, 2015) that African American mothers are more likely than white mothers to be from a lower SES level, which could potentially have some effect on African American children’s academic success, as discussed earlier in relation to AP English.

**Parental advocates.** Parents are typically the most significant advocates for their children in their education and schooling because they normally have the loudest and strongest voice in concern for their children’s future. Such parents can promote the possibility of ensuring future success for their children—they can request additional class sections, demand effective teachers, and waive their children into AP English courses even if grades or test scores do not indicate that they will meet with success.

Researchers (Clotfelter et al., 2005) propose that powerful parents, or parents who make the most “noise,” are the most influential on school administrators and their decisions. In Clotfelter’s et al. study, the researchers’ focus is on the differences between African American and white students in their contact with novice and inexperienced teachers. The researchers argue that African American students, especially in the area of

achievement, are negatively impacted by teachers who have no experience. Although Clotfelter et al. acknowledge that teachers need time to learn and grow, they found that in the five largest school districts in North Carolina, new teachers often teach children who are “difficult to teach” (p. 389). Clotfelter et al. also found “the more power that parents of some students have to influence the decisions of school administrators, the more likely it is that other students will end up with low-quality or novice teachers” (p. 391).

Clotfelter’s research is important because AP courses tend to be taught by experienced teachers who “are enthusiastic about their subject area” and “respect, admire, and like their AP students,” which could contribute to positive academic success and increased literacy (Burton, Whitman, Yepes-Baraya, Cline, & Kim; 2002, p. 25). A research study by Burton, et al. (2002) focused on successful (defined in this study as demonstrating comparative growth from a PSAT score to the score earned on AP exams) AP teachers who teach AP Calculus AB and AP Literature and Composition who work with minority students. Burton et al., found that the specific variables related to success for students in AP courses were having a teacher with a significant number of years (overall) and AP teaching experience, multiple academic certifications, and participation in numerous professional development opportunities. They also found “for African American students, the emphases that are associated with success [in AP English] have to do with developing critical reading skills” (p. 28). Thus, students who do not enroll or meet with success in AP English classes may not because their parents do not have a loud enough “voice,” which could also limit experiences with highly-certified, experienced, caring teachers.

Similarly, Auerbach, an educator and researcher who is the chief editor of a school leadership text and author of several articles advocating familial support for students who are African American or Latina/o, finds that students' parent and family engagement in education supports students. Auerbach (2007) argues:

Parents of color and schools often are separated by cultural divides as well as by legacies of racism, deficit thinking, and mutual distrust [and] African American and Latino parents are more likely than those of the dominant culture to have a skeptical, ambivalent, and potentially adversarial stance toward school programs that have historically failed their communities. (p. 251)

Parental advocacy, voice, and involvement, for the aspects of this study, may help administrators and school counselors consider how many sections of AP English are offered at a school, recognize that more qualified teachers need to teach AP English courses, and might even get a student enrolled in an AP course even if the student was not "tracked" or recommended for the course by a previous teacher. This could potentially be a concern for students who are African American and male because their parents may not make as much "noise" as their white counterparts. Some research even suggests that parents of African American students play a part in the marginalization because they think teachers and schools will advocate for their students to be placed in challenging classes if they perceive ability, even though that is not necessarily a common practice (Archbald et al., 2009). Even worse, recent research (Ford 2014) suggests as racial stratification continues to eliminate a white majority, white parents become "even louder" (p. 1148). Ford (2014) suggests "it is reasonable to conclude that underrepresentation [in gifted courses] persists because decision makers acquiesce to the

status quo. For instance, the demand for gifted programming by higher income white parents can be traced, in part, to the increasing racial resegregation of most schools and communities” (p. 1149). Consequently, “louder” voices, which may influence educational practices and are typically from white parents, may continue the relegation of students who are African American and male to classes that are not AP.

**Parental involvement.** For many students, parental involvement could have a significant impact on achievement, and may help students meet with success in AP courses. Edwards, Thompson, and Turner (2010) in their book titled *Change is Gonna Come* argue “research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children’s learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the research shows that the more intensively parents are involved in their children’s learning, the more beneficial are the achievement *effects*” (p. 122). Their work is not only grounded in historical studies, but also features their personal experiences; additionally, they offer definitive practices to help educators combat marginalization in schools. Furthermore, numerous studies that examine how parents play a role in their child’s success point to increased involvement producing more advantageous educational outcomes (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 1995, Luster & McAdoo, 1996). However, parental involvement has numerous meanings and definitions, which may not be accurate for all racial and/or ethnic groups. In most of the research, parental involvement has been studied in reference to white students and African American students from low SES and/or urban areas; conversely, few (mostly small scale) have studied how African American families encourage achievement (Mattingly, Prislun, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001).

Notably, researchers Hill and Craft (2003), in their study, examined whether the positive influence of parental involvement has an impact on a child's academic or social competence and if the impacts differed among ethnic groups. The study was situated within the U.S. southwest, in a large suburban district, and focused on elementary students from diverse schools. The researchers found that there were disparities between what white families and African American families consider *school involvement*:

For African-Americans, parental involvement may improve achievement through its impact on academic skills because African Americans are less likely to have informal social networks that include parents of other children in the school and thus may be less aware of school expectations. Because of these informal networks, Euro-American parents may have more extensive information about their child's school climate and school activities. Thus, African American parents' presence in the classroom may provide them with information about the skills required by the teacher and enhance their ability to promote and develop these skills in their children. (p. 82)

Parental involvement is important in the realm of success in an AP English course because encouragement, discussion, and the idea of the course providing social capital may encourage participation for students who are African American and male.

Research also suggests that a positive relationship between parents of students who are African American increases the odds of enrolling in a four-year college or university (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2000; Peran & Titus, 2005). Perna and Titus's (2005) study examined the racial/ethnic group differences in the relationship between parental involvement and enrolling in college. Their research studies the ways



that social structures, practices in schools, and policy limit college enrollment and success, particularly for students from lower income families and ethnic minority groups. Their research found that parental involvement “is of greater magnitude for African Americans than for high school graduates of any other racial/ethnic groups” (p. 505). They also found that parentally initiated contact versus reactionary or negatively related (such as a teacher calling home about a behavior problem or tardiness to class) was positively related to the likelihood of enrolling in a four-year college. Notably, AP enrollment combined with parental involvement may increase the likelihood that a student would enroll in a college or university.

Additionally, Yan (1999) found that parental involvement in academic achievement was important in African American families, especially in the aspect of parents talking to their children at home. Yan situated his study within a social capital conceptual framework and sought to determine what characteristics of social capital<sup>11</sup> students who were African American had in comparison with successful students who were white and unsuccessful students who were African American. His focus on social capital was limited to parent interactions (with the students, teachers, school, and other parents) and family norms. Yan found that students who were African American and who were from low SES backgrounds found academic success when they regularly engaged in discussion at home and were provided emotive support by their parents. He also found that “despite their comparatively more disadvantaged home environments, successful African American students demonstrated high levels of social capital” (p. 5).

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<sup>11</sup> The networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society that enables society to function, it is the links, shared values, and understanding that promote cooperation

Meaningful discussion at home may influence some students to enroll in an AP class and encourage successful completion of academically rigorous courses.

However, there are some inconsistencies in the research. Jeynes' (2005) study found that parental involvement had a constructive impact on African American students; however, when the data set was controlled for SES, the influence was no longer statistically significant. His research focused on a 1992 data set<sup>12</sup> that studied the effects of parental involvement on achievement of students who were African American and in the twelfth grade. Jeynes' results "suggests that family background variables" are related to family social capital, and when these variables were controlled, "differences between Black and White students were diminished, and some even showed a pattern of reversal;" consequently, "maintaining high expectations is critical for success throughout high school" (p. 19). Despite this finding, the benefits of parental involvement most likely aid all students' education. Although Jeynes found that the SES variable did not create significance, he did find that "highly involved" parents were a major predictor to the academic outcomes for African American students.

**Reading practices at home.** Since advanced literacy development is often a prerequisite for enrolling in an AP English course and increased literacy skills are necessary for passing an AP English exam, familial influences on literacy development could act as a help or a hindrance to future success. The idea of a child's parents' educational levels and promotion of reading was studied by Davis-Kean (2005) where she found correlations between these two matters on achievement:

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<sup>12</sup> The data set for this study was from a National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS) that 18,726 students participated in (2,260 were African American). The U.S. Department of Education sponsored this survey.

For the African American sample, the relations of both parents' educational attainment and family income were related indirectly to children's achievement through the parents' educational expectations and the reading and the warmth of parent-child interactions. Reading and parental warmth continued to have predictive relations with achievement even after family background and expectations were controlled. This pattern of results is consistent with my hypothesis that parents' years of schooling and family income positively influence the types of literacy-related material and behavior in the home as well as the affective relationship between parents and children. (p. 301)

In her study, Davis-Kean examined students' academic achievement through a national, cross-sectional study of children and relied on a dataset of survey data from 8,000 families. Although her research question focused on the relationship between reading behaviors and achievement, she found through her descriptive statistics that "parent education and income are moderate to strong predictors of achievement outcomes" (p. 297). Therefore, a student's success in an AP English course could be influenced by a student's parents' educational experiences and specific parenting actions, such as reading to children and promoting literacy.

Other researchers such as Heath (1983) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that reading activities and discussions at home influenced a child's literacy development. For example, Heath (1983) studied two similar (demographically) towns; however, one was predominantly white, while the other was African American. In her ethnography, she describes how communities and families influence a child's literacy development, specifically reading, writing, and oral communication. She found that each

community's values influenced how children developed an understanding of learning to read and write. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) studied African American families who were from a low SES and living in an urban area. They observed that these parents were increasing their children's literacy and promoting their children's independence—in sum, different families value and promote literacy in different ways. Although researchers have continued to study literacy development as a cultural or ethnic phenomenon, literacy development is of paramount importance and could likely influence how students could be tracked into ELA courses and if they meet with success.

**Gender differences.** Gender differences and how children are raised may also influence how and why female African American students outperform males in most educational settings, and contribute to less students who are African American and male meeting with success in AP English classrooms. Psychological research has shown that “mothers are more demanding of daughters than they are of sons” and “mothers of sons had childbearing goals that were more fear based” (Varner and Mandara, 2013). In Varner and Madara's research, they found that African American parents had more concern with the effects of racism on their sons than on their daughters, which they argued “had very strong effects on maternal academic and behavioral expectations” (p. 883). Their study assessed the relationship between gender and parenting practices among 796 mothers who were African American of children who were between the ages of eleven and fourteen. They found that the racial discrimination concerns for sons (over the gender discrimination concerns for daughters) were significantly related to the lower academic achievement of boys, and the gender discrimination concerns for girls

contributed to more academic success. Consequently, racial and gender concerns for parents may influence enrollment and possible success in AP English courses.

**Implications for this study.** For the participants of this study, a variety of parental and family influences were reported to have contributed to their success in AP English courses. Although the participants for this study were enrolled in an AP course and earned a passing score (all have enrolled in college or university and some have graduated from a post-secondary institution), parental and familial influence was discussed as highly influential on the extent of their success. For some participants, parental advocacy was a determining factor in enrolling in an AP English course. Family and parents, for these participants, influenced their educational experience and possible successes—many discussed family conversations centered around success and being a successful black man. Most participants discussed reading when they were young and discussing assigned books with parents or siblings as they progressed through their education. Although not all the participants reported noticed gender differences as they were growing up, many did discuss the impact of females on their lives and how they were important on their paths to success.

### **Historical and Contemporary Roadblocks for Literacy Acquisition**

Although SAE and other “white” literacies are promoted in public schools today, especially in most AP English courses, this does not mean that African American male students do not value literacy. However, for African Americans, there have been many roadblocks historically that discouraged literacy attainment. Although education for students who are African American have come a long way since U.S. colonization, there continue to be a significant number of contemporary roadblocks that are also contributing

to marginalization in schools, which minimalizes the chance at meeting with success in an AP English course.

**Slavery.** Historically speaking, African American slaves in the U.S. were often forbidden by law to learn to read and write. Historians tend to agree that the first enslaved Africans were brought to the North American continent by the Dutch, who had apprehended them after detaining a slave ship from Spain in the early part of the seventeenth century when England was attempting to establish the colony of Jamestown in Virginia. Later, in the eighteenth century, many people who were slaves were typically in the northern colonies as house servants or laborers, and in the south, in agriculture. According to U.S. census data, there were four million people who were enslaved living in the U.S. in 1860. For slaves in the U.S., literacy rates were not high. People who owned slaves perhaps thought it would make slaves “more difficult to manage because they would be able to read documents and might begin to believe that they could have a better life. Literate slaves could navigate their way from slavery to freedom more easily and perhaps might encourage others to seek freedom as well” (Edward, Thompson-McMillon, Turner, 2010, p. 41). Although learning to read and write was unlawful, historians estimate about 15-20% of African Americans were literate in 1799; therefore, although punishable activity, African Americans pursued literacy.

If African American slaves learned to read and write, it was often under the auspices of promoting religion. During the U.S. Colonial period, two prominent religious assemblies, Congregationalists and Anglicans, both saw the conversion of slaves as a spiritual responsibility, and the ability to read scriptures was integral to this conversion (Monaghan, 2005). Additionally, Phillis Wheatley (also spelled Phyllis Wheatly), one of

the first published African Americans (born in West Africa), was published in both the American colonies and England in 1733, and earned attention from poetry critics and government officials, such as George Washington.

Historically, there has been a lengthy track of the value of literacy in the U.S. by African American males. A significant event that led to a deterrent in African American literacy was when Nat Turner led a rebellion against white slave owners in Virginia in 1831. Through a religious inspiration, Turner led a brigade, which resulted in the deaths of close to sixty White Virginians. The aftermath was intense—there was retaliation and panic that ensued following the rebellion—and many African Americans were tried and executed. A few months after the rebellion, the Virginia General Assembly deliberated the possibility of ending slavery in the state. While some advised freedom, the pro-slavery side succeeded. Consequently, The General Assembly enacted legislature making it criminal to teach slaves, free African American or people of African descent to read or write, and restricted African Americans from holding religious assemblies without a licensed white minister. Other slave-holding states across the South enacted similar laws restricting activities of slaves and free African Americans (Virginia, 1992).

Although limitations abounded, there were several men who were African American who promoted literacy despite its unlawfulness. A champion of literacy, Frederick Douglass escaped slavery in Maryland, illegally learned to read and write, and became a renowned leader in the abolitionist movement. He was well-known for his orations and writings. In fact, his 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* was not only eminent in promoting the end of slavery, but remains a best-seller and is widely taught in U.S. schools today. In the later part of the nineteenth

century, prominent men, such as W.E.B. DuBois, born in the North, travelled the country promoting liberal arts education. After being the first African American to complete his Ph.D. at Harvard University, he argued that education would be what would liberate African Americans and that educators needed to understand the students who they taught.

Before the Emancipation Proclamation, literacy, or the ability to read and write, meant freedom for African American slaves. Freedom meant both physical freedom, such as the ability to forge free papers, and intellectual freedom, such as writing slave narratives. Slave narratives were a major catalyst and influential genre of U.S. literature because they became an effective weapon in condemning slavery—they gave a voice to the most marginalized people of U.S. history. Besides inspiring the abolitionist movement, being literate meant one could maintain familial relationships when children, husbands, and wives who were separated by the slave trade. One could write letters, record songs, reflect a spiritual journey—there were many reasons why literacy for African Americans would be highly valued.

**Segregation.** The thirteenth amendment did not simply make literacy easy for African Americans, and although there were proponents of literacy, there were also some major roadblocks, especially in the arena of public education. For example, Virginia, in the late 1800s, enacted a law that African Americans should be taught in separate schools and that “Virginian schools would employ one ‘Negro teacher’ for every 232 school-aged African-American child,” which was a horrific overload of pupil per teacher in comparison to white children (Timeline, 2017). In the later 1800s, in the case of Plessy versus Ferguson, the U.S. Supreme Court deemed public schools should be “separate, but equal,” which continued to uphold the status quo of a significant difference in



underfunding African American schools. The separate, and typically impoverished schools, continued for decades until the case of *Brown versus the Board of Education* in 1954, which determined that separate schools for African American and white students was unconstitutional.

Although there was some growth, inequities in schools and literacy development continued. Schools were theoretically desegregated; however, enrollment ethnicity patterns were sluggish to change. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s continued to promote equal education; however, in the mid-1960s “less than 2% of African American children attended multi-racial schools in the eleven states associated with the south” and “many colleges remained white only” (Trueman, para. 21). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited “discrimination because of race, color, religion, or national origin” and became policy, and with it, government initiatives combated discrimination. In 1961, John F. Kennedy enacted Executive Order 10925, which outlined protocols for contractors to take “affirmative action to ensure applicants are employed.” Later, in 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson John referenced affirmative action in his commencement speech at Howard University in Washington D.C. Although color-blind criticism shrouds these policies, the Title VI of the 1968 Civil Rights Act granted colleges and universities the authority to take affirmative action in their admissions process to remedy racial discrimination.

After the mid-1960s, there was much research devoted to African American educational attainment—empirical studies (such as Herbert Aptheker’s “Negro College Students in the 1920s” published in 1969, Timothy Smith’s “Native Blacks and Foreign Whites: Varying Responses to Educational Opportunity in American, 1880-1950”

published in 1972, and Alejandro Portes and Kenneth Wilson's "Black-White Differences in Educational Attainment" published in 1976), instead of anecdotes, were starting to shape educational practices and policies. It appeared for several years that desegregation was happening in U.S. public schools, especially in the U.S. south. However, in 1974, the *Milliken v. Bradley* ruling confirmed that segregation was continuing to happen because it was happening in major cities. With this ruling of not holding schools to desegregate unless it has been proven that district lines for school were created with racist intent, public attention was turned toward watching the rapidly declining enrollment for students who were white from schools in metropolitan areas. For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data, in the 1996-1997 school year, 16.9% of student enrollment was African American; however, in New York city, 36.1% of enrollment was students who were African American, 54.1% in Chicago, 64.0% in Philadelphia, 90.1% in Detroit, 41.5% in Dallas, 86.6% in Memphis, 85.1% in Baltimore, 90.7% in New Orleans, 87.3% in Washington D.C., and 70.4% in Cleveland. In his book *After "Brown": The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation* (2011), Clotfelter argues that white flight<sup>13</sup> in the 1970s and 1980s was "common to many large desegregating school districts during the period of large-scale desegregation orders" (p. 75).

To combat some of these segregation issues and the problems that go along with them, in the 1990s, the choice of charter schools became an option for parents who wanted an effective school versus a child's districted school. Charter schools are public schools, funded by taxes, but managed privately. Some studies (Nathan, 1996) suggest

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<sup>13</sup> *White flight* refers to the residential movement of people who are white to avoid racial integration or when people who are white move to the suburbs to avoid segregation with minorities.

that for students from low socio-economic backgrounds or minorities charter schools potentially could improve their education.

**No Child Left Behind.** In 2001, the U.S. Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), proposed by George W. Bush to sanction standards based educational reform to combat marginalization in education for disadvantaged students. NCLB required that states individually develop assessments that would measure school skills of students in order to receive federal funding. One of the caveats of NCLB required states to provide high quality<sup>14</sup> teachers for all its students. Although the NCLB was recently replaced by a new act, the U.S. Department of Education, in 2005, released data that showed improvements. For example, African American students who were nine years old in 2005 had reading and math scores that reached an all time high, and the achievement gaps in reading and math for these students between white students were at an all time low (Aud, Fox, KewalRamani, 2010, p. 91). In 2015, NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which gave states more leniency in measuring student performance.

**Contemporary issues.** Although there have been attempts on having an equal and equitable U.S. public school system, there are still many schools serving African American students that are significantly underfunded, and “schools continue to limit equal education access and opportunity based on race” (Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004, p. 1). The inequalities that continue to exist today go beyond the scope of this literature review, but historically speaking, African Americans have been on a challenging path in relation to developing literacy skills in U.S. public schools.

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<sup>14</sup> A *highly qualified teacher*, according to NCLB, must have a bachelor’s degree in the content area they teach and have state certification

Currently, major roadblocks for success for African American students include modern-day segregation, disproportionate disciplinary referrals, over identification in special education, increased drop out rates, decreased likelihood of graduating from a post secondary institutions, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

One contemporary setback is that segregation still exists in today's public schools. In her article, "America's Schools: Separate and Unequal" (2017), Dickason maintains that "74% of black students attend majority nonwhite schools" and that "the typical white student attends a school where three-quarters of their peers are white" (p. 13). This is a problem in reducing marginalization because research suggests that students who are African American who attend integrated schools do better on achievement tests, have increased educational attainment and a reduced dropout rate, and reduced the probability of incarceration (Mickelson, Bottia, & Lambert, 2013; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegal-Hawley, 2012).

Another contemporary problem in U.S. public schools is the over-referral of African American students for suspension and expulsion, which research shows has increased in recent years (Brown, 2007; Sanders, 2014; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Research shows that students who are African American are "2.19 (elementary) to 3.78 (middle) times as likely to be referred to the office for problem behavior as their white peers," and they were more likely to receive out of school suspension or expulsion as punishments for the same or similar behavior as white students (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, Tobin, 2011, p. 85). This is also problematic because research has shown that disciplinary actions, especially expulsions, can have a negative effect on student achievement (Brown, 2007). Besides punishing students, suspensions and expulsions can

also keep students from their classrooms, which may make it difficult to “catch up” when they return; they could also be placed in an alternative school, which may not have effective teachers or a culturally relevant curriculum; or worse, could possibly be arrested and face incarceration. Research, too, does suggest that “being suspended once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out” (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Contemporary research also shows that the problem of a disproportionate number of African American students are overly placed in special education, where they are “2.41 times more likely than White students to be identified as having mental retardation,” despite decades of research that reveal this unbalance (Blanchett, 2006, p. 24). This can offer several problems—achievement gains can lack in comparison to students who are not labeled with disabilities, students can be placed in self-contained settings, and limitations to culturally relevant and/or rigorous content may be diminished. This is especially problematic when research shows that “no other group is as overreferred, overidentified, and overrepresented in special education as Black students, specifically Black males” (Ford & Russo, 2016, p. 50).

In addition, a problem that is resisting change for students who are African American are continually elevated dropout rates from high school. Brown, in her studies on the male African American youth and drop out rates (2007a, 2008b, Payne & Brown, 2010) found that only about half graduate from high school. Stetser and Stillwell (2014) in their U.S. Department of Education report also reported that African American students who *enroll* in a public school have a mere 67% graduation rate. Unfortunately, when students who are African American and male have higher drop out rates than other

ethnic groups, it leads to lower education attainment, which has been shown to be linked to propensity to crime. In 2012, more than one-third of young African American men without a high school diploma were incarcerated on any given day (Pettit & Sykes, 2015).

Research also suggests that African American enrollment in post secondary educational institutions is on the decline since the 1970s (Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In Meier and Rutherford's (2016) research study on the 1,800 largest school districts in the U.S., they examined the status of African American education and the role that partisanship plays. In their research, they found that "black students continue to have both the lowest high school graduation and college enrollment rates" and that "these students are often underprepared for college coursework because they have little to no exposure to advanced or gifted classes" (p. 5). They also maintain:

For a school with one hundred black students in the ninth grade class, sixty of these students will graduate high school. Only thirty-three of these students will be college bound, largely to public or for-profit institutions. This means that only one in three black students who enroll in high school is likely to pursue postsecondary education, and many of these students will not make it to their college graduation (Meir & Rutherford, 2016, p. 5).

Finally, another contemporary issue is the school-to-prison pipe line, which Payne and Brown (2010) define as a tangle of institutional conditions inside and outside of schools that funnel youth from schools to prisons (p. 307). These researchers argue that the school-to-prison pipeline (SPP) especially exists for young African American males

because of “institutional and interpersonal racism, poor treatment and lack of academic and social support from school personnel, exclusionary disciplinary action, and school violence and disorder” (p. 308). Heitzeg (2009), a sociologist, argues in that “current educational practices have increasingly blurred the distinction between school and jail. The school to prison pipeline refers to this growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via ‘zero tolerance policies’” (p. 1). The SPP also disproportionately impacts students who are male, poor, and African American, since they are expelled at this highest rates (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Witt, 2007). Rocque and Paternoster (2011) studied the relationship between race and school discipline and the racial context of students. In their study, they used a multi-level analysis to examine whether African American elementary school students were more likely to receive disciplinary measures while controlling for individual, classroom, and school factors. Their findings showed that African American children did receive more referrals than any other racial category, which the researchers suggest is important when considering the SPP that exists for students who are African American and lack of engagement in school. Skiba, Arredondo, and Williams (2014), researchers on school discipline and equity, propose that the metaphor of the SPP, as it exists in school today are “risk factors for a range of negative developmental outcomes” (p. 546).

Both historical and contemporary roadblocks for students who are African American are important to consider in creating equal and equitable schools for all students. Although these roadblocks did not completely prevent participants in this study from meeting with success in an AP English course, some participants did discuss these roadblocks in relation to their success.

**Voice**

Although closely connected to both school and race-related potential roadblocks for enrolling in or finding success in an AP English course, a student who is African American and male might meet with limitations because of his literal “voice.” The term “voice” encompasses African American Language (AAL), and how there can be issues related to its use in a U.S. public high school. “Voice” can also reference the “voice” that students who are African American and male may utilize to be “cool” or when they code-switch in educational settings. Language, especially within the realm of an ELA classroom or AP English classroom, can provide its own potential success barriers.

**Language differences.** A possible barrier for success for African American males, especially in the consideration of AP English courses, may be related to language. Languages and discourse practices are one of the most significant aspects of cultural identity. Whether language differences are based on geographical areas or career specializations, there tends to be differences in groups’ words, colloquialisms, and jargon. Language can be classified in many ways—formal versus informal, slang versus proper, direct versus convoluted—and language is often the unifying aspect of a group’s culture. In the U.S., there are many types of languages spoken, and many schools acknowledge this by providing English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English Language Learner (ELL), or English Learners (EL) programs. The purpose of these programs is to provide English language development support for students. The widespread allocations of these programs suggest that schools understand that students need support when in an environment where language is important. However, these services are not provided for students who use AAL. For this study, AAL refers to the



distinctive speech of some (not all) African Americans (also referred to as African American English, African American Vernacular English, black speech, and sometimes referred to as “Ebonics”—an antiquated and academically unaccepted term for AAL). Although a defining exploration of AAL is beyond the scope of this literature review, it is generally accepted that it is the vernacular or “the dialect spoken by many young African American students attending the nations’ public schools” and is considered a “major cultural-linguistic system” (Craig, Kolenic, & Hensel, 2014, p. 144). Definitions of AAL change over time and shift during different social climates; however, AAL has customarily been referred to as a linguistic system with “well-defined rules,” which crosses different regions of the U.S. and age groups (Green, 2011, p. 76). Green, a linguist who has written the texts *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (2002) and *Language and the African American Child* (2011), contends that AAL often includes slang, specific vocabulary, sound patterns, rhythmic intonations, verbal markers, sentence structures, inversions, negations, and sentence types. She also proposes that AAL is a “language with socially stigmatized linguistic patterns” (p. 77). Although scholars and researchers debate over the exact definition of AAL, whether it is a dialect or a language, and the complex social and educational issues that arise from the use of AAL, it is accurate to assert that it is a systematic means of communication that has some differences from Standard American English<sup>15</sup> (SAE) and is used by some African American students.

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<sup>15</sup> Standard American English (SAE) will be defined as “a widely socially accepted variety of English that is held to be the linguistic norm and that is relatively unmarked with respect to regional characteristics of English (p. 410).” It is also known as Formal Standard English, Mainstream American English, Dominant American English (DAE), standard dialect, American English. This definition was taken from Wolfram, W., & Schilling, N. (2015). *American English: dialects and variation* (Vol. 25). John Wiley & Sons.

Interestingly, research suggests that language is the most important aspect to maintaining a group identity in African American communities (Fordham, 1999). There is much literature devoted to understanding language and the significance of language of African American students, which also go beyond the scope of this literature review. However, SAE and AAL have different language characteristics (spelling, pronunciation, connotations, grammar, phonology, syntax, etc.), and the use or nonuse of these languages may impact educational practices and literacy development. Furthermore, some research has suggested that SAE is “sanctioned and celebrated in both the system of public schooling and the larger U.S. community” while “Black discourse style violates the polite linguistic (as well as broader discourse) practices” (Fordham, 1999, p. 276).

Baker-Bell’s study (2013) of an English teacher and her students in an eleventh grade AP Language and Composition course found that African American students resisted using SAE outside of formal written or spoken academic activities in the English class because they believed it reflected white culture and did not want to use language associated with that culture. Her study, which focused on exploring attitudes toward AAL and teacher pedagogy, took place in a suburban mid-west city and all the participants (27 students, teacher, and herself as researcher) were African American. According to the teacher, all the students were speakers of AAL, but also had the ability to code switch between SAE and AAL in formal and informal writing and speaking activities (using SAE in formal academic situations). In her study, she found that African American students in the AP English class she studied described AAL as “improper” and “language of the ignorant” and described SAE as “proper” and “the language of the well-educated” (p. 363). Although the students resisted SAE in out of class contexts and considered SAE

to reflect white culture, she found that students had negative reactions to African American language. Barker-Bell argues that too many educators continue to champion SAE, which makes students “critically aware of their social and linguistic realities” (p. 366). Her research study calls for a reconsideration of the the role of AAL in today’s ELA classroom and advocates for a bridge between teachers and researchers to implement more critical language pedagogies in ELA classrooms.

Baker-Bell’s research, although recent, sheds new light on an area that has been heavily researched in the area of AAL and education. Fordham, a researcher who studies how ethnicity influences African American students in the classroom, has conducted several studies and written numerous articles about the implications of being African American, especially in high school. Fordham (1999) maintains:

The way in which the speakers’ discourse styles convey meaning and both conceal and make manifest a perception of power. Among most dominant group members, for instance, Black discourse practices mark the speaker as lacking civility, cultural graces, or good taste. Because this kind of language usage is deemed inappropriate, Black people’s continuous use of such linguistic makers promotes academic and social failure. (p. 276)

Both Baker-Bell’s (2013) and Fordham’s (1999) findings suggest that African Americans may view their language as not academic or as inferior to SAE; therefore, students who view themselves as using predominantly AAL may not see a place for themselves in the AP English classroom. In fact, the AP English classroom may be a place where students who are African American feel the most marginalized, especially in relation to both spoken and written language, and the emphasis on utilizing SAE in the

typical AP English classroom. Godly and Minnici (2008), in their study that examined how classroom discussions between teachers and students about different dialects of U.S. English can provide a strong base for students who speak AAL, maintain that it is important that literacy, reading, and ELA teachers and researchers “learn more about the design and implementation of language instruction that forefronts language variation, students’ use of nonacademic dialects, the connection between language and identity, and the relationship of power mediated through language” (p. 320). Their study concentrated on designing and implementing a stand alone unit about dialectical differences, which followed a study of the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The researchers found that students were cautious in discussing the racist attitudes of two of the white main characters that was revealed through a conversation about the way another character who was African American spoke in her church and with her family, and why it differed from her speech patterns she used around them. They also found that most students “seemed to value dialects spoken in White communities more than in African American communities” (p. 329). However, by immersing students in a critical study of language, the researchers found that students were able to compare and contrast different perspectives of language dialects, which influenced their own sociolinguistic understandings, beliefs, and attitudes.

Although Baker-Bell (2013) and Godly and Minnici (2008) both promote the inclusion of a critical study of language in ELA classrooms, they all acknowledge many of the difficulties that many ELA teachers face when implementing this pedagogy— cultural and ethnic issues for the teacher, curriculum constraints, not enough training, social climates, inadequacies in understanding the connections between culture and race, and apprehension in discussing language, which may promote perceptions of power or

ethnic stereotypes. Traditional AP English teachers, who are typically female and white, and have had multiple years of teaching experience might be the most hesitant to include critical language pedagogy in their classroom, which may alienate African American males and discourage enrollment in these courses.

**The language of “Acting White” and code switching.** For the typical student, continual proponents of SAE in classrooms may offer some limitations; however, for the gifted or AP student, these limitations may be intensified. In Ford et al. (2008) study on the experiences of gifted African American students, the researchers found that “acting White” was mostly characterized by language differences. In their descriptive and exploratory study of 166 African American gifted students (from fifth to twelfth grade), the researchers attempted to determine the effects of peer pressure. They also surveyed these students about their attitudes towards school achievement and perceptions of “acting White” and “acting Black.” For many of the students in the study, they associated speaking SAE with an “acting white” behavior, which students perceived that they must do when taking advanced courses in order to be successful. Most students in the study also reported that they had been accused of “acting White.” Fordham (1999), in the previously discussed study, furthers this idea by suggesting that African American students often “lease” SAE and use it when situations arise, such as the classroom. However, African American may resist embracing SAE because they “do not want to own something they collectively identify as having been a historical instrument of Black enslavement, oppression, and dehumanization” and helps them maintain their “Black identity” and ownership of their own discourse (Fordham, 1999, p. 277).

Another area that has been heavily researched in the area of AAL in schools is the concept of code switching, which implies that students use one type of language in formal contexts, such as school; and another type of language in informal contexts, such as with friends or family. Research, such as Canagarajah's (2006), recommends that current code switching pedagogies used in today's classrooms are damaging because they delay literacy practices and understanding and create "linguistic hierarchies." Canagajah is a leading literacy and language educator, ethnographer, and researcher, and studies the challenges in English academics. Although it may be damaging for some students, code switching is sometimes cited by teachers as helpful for African American students to learn because it potentially could increase employability and provide job security (Young, 2014, p. 465). Teachers who encourage code switching, which could happen in an AP English classroom, could potentially offend African American students because it implies that SAE is more powerful than AAL.

Young, a researcher and educator, focuses his studies on his sociolinguistic concept of code-meshing and AAL. He has co-authored seven books and has written several articles against code switching for students who are African American. Young (2009) argues that code switching approaches ignore race, which could contribute to discriminatory reaction to language used by African American students. Young (2014) maintains that "code-switching becomes an institutionalized form of language instruction that perpetuates a sense of the educational inferiority of African American English and the professional and social inferiority of African American people" (p. 465). Furthermore, Young claims that code switching promotes the "antimasculine, queering" of African American male students (p. 465). This could be problematic for today's AP

English educators where SAE continues to be championed. In Baker-Bell' (2013) previously discussed study, she maintains that even in this era of stressed multicultural understandings for educators, teachers are still not considering AAL in the “larger system of language learning” (p. 355). Other researchers and linguistics (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011) have found that teachers continue to make choices that promote SAE and minimalize AAL. They contend that “standards for language have often been invoked to simplify teaching and learning of language. But these have often resulted in denigrating the language practices of particular groups and their members as somehow ‘standard’ or ‘deviant’” (p. 305). In consideration of AP English courses, these language issues may be magnified, since the content of both courses is to study language and the effects of language choices.

**Implications for this study.** For many of the participants in this study, I have witnessed active code switching both in the classroom and in this study's interview processes between SAE and AAL. I have observed several of the participants utilize SAE when I addressed them in the classroom and initiated a spoken response. I have also witnessed these same students rely on AAL when speaking with their friends in the hallway and lunch room. This may or may not have influenced their success, but most likely has influenced their particular language acquisition. Many participants in this study discussed their use of code switching, and some indicated that being able to use SAE effectively contributed to their success. Additionally, some shared that were accused of “Acting White,” and what they did to negate those implications. Most of the participants contended that they relied on different ways of speaking in different

situations, and one particular participant situated his understanding of “voice” within a realm of socioeconomic and education variables.

### **Finding Success in U.S. Public Schools**

Although much of the research previously presented focused on the *problem* instead of the *solution*, there are emerging research studies that focus on African Americans and academic success. Although few research studies address success in AP courses, or even more specifically in AP English courses, there are some generalities that arise from the literature that is not deficit-oriented. Some of these conceptions have already been discussed in previous sections; however, an assemblage of solution-oriented literature will shape the conceptualization of this research study. Students who meet with success in U.S. public schools typically may have teachers who use culturally relevant curriculum, may have effective teachers, may attend a school that has been reformed or is in a school academy, may be supported outside of school, may have positive role models, or may have parents who have a high level of education.

**ELA curriculum.** Previously discussed in the section subtitled *The Absence of Culturally Relevant Curriculum*, was the idea that few educators utilize a culturally relevant curriculum, which could promote literacy for African American students. There is only a limited amount of research that focuses on including the AAL voice, developing literacy through critical teaching of popular culture, and using Hip-Hop as a lens for promoting literacy in ELA classes. Additionally, research suggests that some African American students find ELA curriculum inaccessible because SAE is promoted in most U.S. ELA classes. This inaccessibility may be especially true for students in diverse classrooms; therefore, inclusion of popular culture, media, Hip-Hop music and other



elements that include or rely on AAL may be more engaging for students who are African American, which may promote meeting with success in an ELA classroom.

Hughes-Hassell, Barkley, and Koehler (2009) argue that motivation is a crucial aspect of reading success. In their research, they found that a “disconnect between children’s real-life experiences and backgrounds may cause them to find reading frustrating” and that this is especially true from students who are African American who “are unlikely to read if they are not given stories about people who look like them and behave as they do” (p. 4). In their study situated within the context of critical race theory, the researchers attempted to determine if individual groups of color were represented in books and the race and ethnicity of the authors. The researchers found that only “25.8% of the books contained at least one persons of color as a main or major secondary character” and that the majority of the authors were white (p. 10). They propose that this may be one of the factors contributing to low reading scores, and that a way to combat this would be to have more inclusive reading materials for students. In later research, Hughes-Hassell and Rawson (2011) argue that texts, for African American male students, need to be engaging to promote literacy, which is done through texts that “promote a healthy psyche,” “reflect an awareness of the real world,” “focus on the collective struggle of African Americans,” and “serve as a road map” (p. 16).

Research by Duncan-Andrade (2004), a former English teacher and current researcher, revealed that popular culture was especially important in engagement for his African American students. In his teacher as researcher role, Duncan-Andrade interviewed students from different academic performance levels. For this (2004) particular study, he interviewed three of his twelfth grade students who were male and

African American. He found that his participants' contentions "reflect the sentiments of many urban students in their desire for a more intellectually rigorous literacy curriculum that employs youth popular culture as a bridge to traditional literary skills" (p. 317).

Additionally, he contends that educators "should be using youth culture to scaffold these skills [critique, analysis, memorization, recitation, oral presentation] into academic literacy" (p. 331).

Morrell (2002), a teacher, teacher educator and researcher, contends that a lack of inclusion of popular culture stems from "a lack of understanding" from ELA teachers (p. 73). In his research on teaching of popular culture (he uses his own experiences during eight years of teaching in an urban high school), he argues that Hip-Hop music is socially, culturally, and academically relevant. In his 2002 article, he writes about a unit he created for a high school senior English poetry project. The inclusion of Hip-Hop was situated within the context of well-regarded poets and poems, but Morrell examined poetry through a Hip-Hop lens. He reported that his students were able to make quality interpretations and interesting connections between established poetry and rap songs. Later, in his book *Critical Literacy and Urban Youth: Pedagogies of Access, Dissent and Liberation* (2015), he maintains that he does "not want to eliminate novels, poetry, and plays from the English language curriculum," but wants to "use critical literary theories to unpack canonical and contemporary literary texts" because it increases student understanding (p. 84).

Samy Alim (2007) a researcher who studies issues of language, identity, and education in relation to Hip-Hop culture argues in his research and writings that "hip-hop is an important site of educational practice. As a form of popular culture, it is inevitably

part of school culture and becomes, either formally or informally, part of the school curriculum” (p. 89). In his 2004 study on his own ninth and eleventh grade English students, he found students were able to meet with success when they documented the linguistic elements of Hip-Hop songs.

In Kirkland’s (2008) studies of African American students in his own English classes, he promotes the use of Hip-Hop to engage students and “to not only advance students’ academic literacy development but to ultimately adjust how literacy is conceived of, practiced, and assessed” (p. 44). Kirkland is an English teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, and found that his African American students were disengaged with the traditional literary canon, but when he situated learning within the realities of his students’ lives, learning opportunities were “far more spectacular than the ones currently present in most English classrooms” (p. 45).

A culturally relevant curriculum is not limited to including books with more characters who are African American or using popular culture or using Hip-Hop. It is much more than this as described in the section *The Absence of a Culturally Relevant Curriculum*. Although some researchers are calling for an inclusion of a culturally relevant curriculum and reporting success (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995), other educational researchers, such as Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) maintain “our focus is on the importance and benefit of knowing about the histories and valued practices of cultural groups rather than trying to teach prescriptively according to broad underexamined generalities about groups” (p. 20). For example, although some researchers have had success including Hip-Hop when teaching students who are African American, this may not be the case for all teachers or all students who are African American. Teachers may

not have an understanding of Hip-Hop in the way a student would and opportunities for misunderstanding could happen. Additionally, not all students *like* Hip-Hop music, and may actually be offended when a teacher *assumes* that he or she does because he or she is African American. Gutiérrez and Rogoff argue that this could be detrimental to the learning process for students and promote a repertoires of practice approach:

Within a learning styles approach, a single way of teaching and learning may be used with a particular group without accounting for individuals' past experiences or without providing instruction that both extends those experiences and introduces new and even unfamiliar ways of doing things. This stands in stark contrast to the strategic forms of assistance we have observed in robust learning communities where the co-construction of a community's various practices and individual development support the changing nature of participation and the forms of assistance provided in joint activity. (p. 20)

Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) maintain understanding students from a cultural-historical approach as a best method and preserve the idea that it is significant to understand students as individuals within a community instead of having a one-size-fits-all understanding of cultural or ethnic groups and teaching toward their categorical traits.

**Effective teachers.** Although ELA teachers sometimes can be seen as gatekeepers to AP enrollment and success, effective and supportive teachers, along with a contemporary curriculum, could influence success for students who are African American and male in AP English classes. For example, Pollard's (1993) study regarding support for African American students suggested that both male and female students could identify teachers who provided support for their schooling; however, males and females differed in the

types of help they reported. In her two-tiered study, she focused on achievement and gender differences of African American students. She used data from 361 middle and high school students and compared results from a survey questionnaire. In her study, Pollard found that “girls were twice as likely as boys (69.2% vs. 30.8%) to indicate that teachers were supportive of them by providing specific help with schoolwork. This category included such examples as ‘taking time to provide special help,’ ‘explaining things when I don’t understand,’ and ‘letting me come after school or during ‘prep’ period for extra help’” (p. 337). Pollard also found that “more boys than girls (60% vs. 40%) reported that teachers provided support to them through such responses as ‘listens to and understands me,’ and ‘lets us get to know him/her’ or ‘jokes around with us’” (p. 338). This finding suggests that relationships with teachers, from a personal connection, may be what students who are African American value most.

Conchas and Noguera (2004), in their two-year study of high-achieving African American males in an urban high school in California, found that “the majority of students [...] alluded to the school context as significant in the development of motivation. Students sense a link between the school context—including teachers, exposure to professions and college preparatory curriculum—and their achievement” (p. 328). Their study, which focused on interviews and observations of thirteen students who enrolled in a college-bound program and also included interview data from forty-five teachers and administrators from the high school where the young men were enrolled, found that motivation for enrolling in classes that provided college preparatory curriculum increased when students felt connected to their schools and teachers. Thus,

students may be more likely to enroll in AP courses when they feel a connectedness to their school context.

Moreover, teacher perceptions of students who are African American need to change if these students are going to meet with success. In Yan's (1999) study situated in a social capital theory, he attempts to identify the characteristics of social capital held by successful students who were African American. Yan used a 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study conducted by the U.S. Departments of Education, a large and comprehensive database which surveyed students in four waves and also provided data from parents, teachers, and school administrators. Yan recommends that "educators need to increase their awareness and acknowledgement of cultural differences in parental involvement in order to better challenge their own and others' stereotypical ideas and attitudes toward minority parents" (p. 20).

**School-based reforms and school academies.** As discussed, the concept of including a culturally relevant curriculum in ELA classes and having supportive ELA teachers may be imperative for African American academic success. However, the lack of community present in many of today's U.S. high schools, which are often large, sprawling places, may be daunting for students who value communal support that encourages success. In Conchas and Clark's (2002) study, the researchers focused on eighty urban high school students who were a minority and enrolled in a career academy<sup>16</sup> at one of the two schools they studied. They used a case study approach and collected data from interviews, focus groups, and observations of the students. The researchers also interviewed teachers and other staff members of both high schools. They

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<sup>16</sup> usually a school within a secondary school where career-related curriculum is offered

sought to determine why career academies could generate optimism among students who are low-income and / or minority. Conchas and Clark found that “Black males attending the academies reported that they experienced an intimate school-within-a-school community that created a spirit of camaraderie among students and teachers” and found that cultivating “school-within-school community makes it possible to avoid or lessen the racial and ethnic hostility found in the larger school culture through the formation of strong inter-racial peer cultures” (p. 307). Therefore, creating smaller schools, schools-within-schools, and in-house academies may also help students who are African American meet with success. Although not fully investigated, this could also lead to other forces of marginalization for African American males—they may not be “tracked” into academies, they might not have outside support, or standardized test scores might prohibit acceptance to an academy. However, Conchas and Clark argue that, “despite urban inequality, the Career Academy model fosters optimism among low-income minority students. However, students' experiences differ within each academy context. Some Career Academy structures are able to promote positive student relations, whereas others simply reflect the status quo” (p. 312). Although there may be limitations to academies because of the enrollment processes of different academies, the narratives of success may offer more insight into the how academic achievement can be improved.

**Support outside of schools and positive role models.** One significant indication that emerged from research supports the contention that African American students have increased academic achievement when they feel supported outside of school (Pollard, 1993). Being supported could be a factor for students when enrolling in AP English courses because students may find it easier to meet with success. Pollard’s research is

situated in a review of the literature on achievement and gender differences among students who are African American and two empirical studies (achievement/testing data and interviews that she conducted). The two studies focused on achievement and found that students who met with more success academically had positive self concepts, support, and problem solving skills. In her second study, which was a follow-up to her first, she focused on gender differences. Pollard argues interpersonal support is an important factor needed to help African American adolescents cope with school. However, many of the students in her study found such support outside, rather than within, the school setting. Pollard also found that it was significantly important for male students to have support, “91% of the boys and 86% of the girls identified individuals outside of school who supported their schooling. Most often these were family members. Two kinds of help were provided [...] specific help with homework and general advice and encouragement to persist and work hard” (p. 349).

Other researchers, such as the previously discussed Conchas and Clark’s (2004) study on students who were African American and college-bound, found that family and home environment were important for positive school engagement. In their study, they found that the majority of the participants “view their parents as the most significant source of their school engagement” and propose that “there is no doubt that male role models both in school and in the home are essential to the academic success of African American young men” (p. 51).

Additionally, Yan (1999), as previously discussed, found that home discussion is a component of parental involvement that contributes to students’ academic success. Specifically, Yan found that “the families of successful African American students



demonstrate equal or higher levels of parental involvement than do those of successful European American students, despite the former's comparatively disadvantage home environment" (p. 19).

Moreover, Hayes (2012) in his study on parental ratings, sought to determine if specific parental involvement behaviors were better predictors of academic success for students who are African American. His research participants were 145 parents/guardians of students who were African American and attending an urban high school from one of two large schools, and he collected the data through surveys. In his research, Hayes found that "home-based involvement was the only significant predictor of achievement outcomes in this sample of African American adolescents that performed better academically and missed fewer days of school" (p. 576).

Additionally, Gordon (2016), in her study on the connections between media use and academic achievement of students who were African American, explored the potential media stereotypes on academic performances through a survey of 247 African American adolescents. Gordon found that parents who highly monitored their children's media consumption had a more significant impact on their child's future career interests, "for students whose parents were less involved in their television use, greater television exposure and identification were associated with having less interest in careers that require a college education" (p. 203) The findings in this study indicate that parental involvement has a significant impact on career interests, which could increase the likelihood of enrolling in an AP course that suited their interest.

Seemingly, it is certainly evident that students increase their academic potential when they have support and encouragement from outside influences. Although much of the

research supports this, it is unclear exactly how outside support plays a role in the enrolling in an AP English course.

All students, including African American students, may benefit from having positive role models outside the school. Pollard (1993), in his previously described study, found that “students had no difficulty identifying their models for future plans and aspirations. In addition, three fourths of both male and female students identified same-sex adults as important models for their educational and occupational plans for the future” (p. 352). Pollard found that very few African American students acknowledged a person in their school setting as a role model and the most identified was a same-sex relative. Notably, the participants in the study identified individuals as important “because they were personally supportive, had desirable personal characteristics, or because they had high levels of occupational and/or educational attainment” (p. 351). The study also suggests “that boys in this sample easily identified same-sex models, especially within their families, [which] belies a common stereotype that positive role models do not exist for African American children” (p. 353).

Conchas and Noguera’s (2004) previously described study also found that high achieving African American males “expressed a need for and interest in receiving support that goes beyond the classroom and into the community” (p. 331). Several participants described men who serve as role models (priests, coaches, teachers, community leaders, family members) in school and in the community who could act as a mentor. They also found that for African American males, “the importance of mentors to expose African American males to various career options and to break stereotypes” and having “adult male role models” were important for support and exposure to college and the world of

work (p. 329) Although the exact impact of positive role models on achievement, or success in AP classes, is not directly supported by the literature, an understanding of this significance is important to keep in mind in continuing to study the successes of students who are African American and male.

**Parental education.** Although much research that was previously discussed points to the destructive aspects of students who come from lower SES, contemporary researchers (Chiu, Economos, Markson, Raicovi, Howell, Morote, & Inserra, 2016), have found that parent education levels minimize the supposed detrimental effects of economic impoverishment. Chiu et al. (2016) collected a significant amount of demographic data on student perceptions of family income, parental education levels, and race, and measured their perceptions in relation to academic achievement (students' grade point averages). Findings in their research demonstrated that the education-level of the students' fathers who were African American had the greatest impact on academic achievement. Additionally, Ford et al. (2008), in their previously described study, maintain that families need to act as mentors to their children and create a positive racial identity (p. 236). Some research has shown (Clark, 1991; Ford & Harris, 1996), that African American students find the most success in their education when parents promote high expectations in achievement, and that these outlooks lessened the effects of socioeconomic deficits.

For students to enroll and meet with success in AP English courses, one or all of these factors— a culturally relevant curriculum, effective teachers, school-based reform and academies, support outside of school and positive role models, and parental education— may be necessary. In this research study, participants identified mostly all of these

factors as influential on their success. This study offers further confirmation that these influences are important for student success.

### **Conclusion**

As detailed in the introduction for this study, my personal observations as an AP English teacher are the source of my interest in exploring the successes in AP English courses, on AP English exams, and the future implications for students who are African American and male. From the literature review that is presented, one can ascertain that the causes for marginalization may be rooted in a broad economic, social, and cultural context; additionally, both the home and school environments can act as discriminatory influences that could negatively affect a student's academic success. The study that follows is based on these assumptions; however, for all students who are African American and male, it is important to understand that there may be only one factor that is contributing to their marginalization in AP English courses; however, for some students, it may be a combination of many, or all. The literature review of the deficit-based research suggests numerous causes for marginalization from AP English courses. For the research and studies that have focused on success for students, the literature suggests that students' self-concepts and self-esteem can positively influence achievement. Also, effective teachers, school-based reform, restructuring academic programs and ELA curricula could impact educational accomplishments. Further, having positive role models, constructive community affiliations, and effective teachers may contribute to academic success. These two assumptions—that there can be one or multiple detriments to academic success for students who are African American and male and that there can also be positive influences on increasing academic achievement—frame this research

study. However, going beyond the generalities provided in the “stories of success” is much needed if we want to increase the chance of success in AP English courses.

To conclude, “change can take place more readily when we instill a scholar identity within gifted Black males and when educators become culturally responsive and empowered” (Whiting, 2009, p. 225). Unfortunately, African American males are greatly underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and AP courses. By far, the deficit-oriented research outweighs the stories of success. The following study will contribute to the narrative of how educators, policy makers, administrators, parents, and students themselves can continue to increase a chance for success in AP English courses, to encourage literacy growth, and to boost college-readiness and likelihood for completing college for students who are African American and male.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study examined the experiences and influences of eight former high school students who are male and African American who enrolled and participated in an AP English class; additionally, this study examined the students' understanding of how they met with success in an AP English course by earning a "3" or higher on either one of the two AP English exams and maintaining a 79.6% (B- or higher) in an AP English course. The purpose was also to explore and survey the perceptions of the influences, experiences, and practices that led to their success and how they may have influenced later academic experiences.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do students who are African American and male come to enroll in an AP English course? What leads them to the point where they decided to register for an AP English class?
2. How do students who are African American and male explain their own "story of success" in terms of earning a "3" or higher on an AP English exam and by maintaining at least a 79.5% in an AP English course?
3. How do these students who met with success in AP English courses describe the influences, experiences, and practices (from a societal, familial, educational, and cultural perspective) that led to their success?
4. How do the participants believe their success in AP English influenced their later lived experiences, especially as a scholar?

In this chapter, I provide an overview and rationale for the case study methodology that I used to investigate my research questions. I then discuss the recruitment of participants and the participants themselves. From there, I discuss the triangulation of data. Next, although there were limitations, I move into a discussion of ensuring validity and quality through self-reflexivity, researcher bias, position of power, credibility, trustworthiness, and member checking. Finally, I conclude with the coding process and the maintenance of a chain of evidence.

### **Research Design**

Based on the research questions and the aspiration to clarify the “how” and the “why” behind students who are male and African American and met with success in an AP English course, a case study method was appropriate. A case study, “as a research method is used in many situations, to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organization, social, political, and related phenomena” (Yin, 2014, p. 4). Yin (2014) also contends that when “‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are more explanatory,” they will likely “lead to the use of a case study [...] as the preferred research method” (p. 5). Patton (1990) contends that case studies are “preferred and needed” when “researchers are puzzled by particular cases—unusual successes” (p. 99). Therefore, according to Yin and Patton, a case study was most appropriate for attempting to determine the “unusual successes” of students in AP English courses.

Furthermore, Baxter and Jack (2008) assert that case study methodology is fitting when: “(a) the focus of the study is to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d)

the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context” (p. 545). Therefore, a case study approach was most suitable for this study because I was attempting to determine the “how” and “why” of successful students, I could not manipulate their success because it is something that has already happened, the contextual situation for these students is of utmost importance because it has rarely been studied or addressed, and since there is no definitive research on this phenomenon, the boundaries are certainly “not clear.”

Additionally, Patton (1990) argues that case studies are useful when “one needs to understand some special people, particular problem, or unique situation in great depth” and that “a great deal can often be learned about how to improve a program by studying dropouts, failures, or successes,” which often “yield such rich case study data” (p. 54). Consequently, a case study approach for these research questions attempted to explore, explain, and describe influences of success in great depth because participants provided rich data.

The case study approach was advantageous for my research questions because it facilitated the search for patterns and themes across several cases. The purpose behind using the case study approach for this research study was to gather, collect, organize, and analyze the data about each case study. The type of case study for this study, as outlined by Stake (1995), had multiple elements. This case study is explanatory (what are the perceptions that led to enrollment?), exploratory (what experiences and influences prompted success?), descriptive (description of the practices and the real-life contexts for participants), multiple (allowing differences within and between participants’ experiences), and instrumental (the intent is to gain insight and understanding).



Additionally, Yin (2014) also argues that the case study is the preferred method to use when describing contemporary events because this methodology relies on “interviews of the persons involved in the events” (p. 12). Furthermore, this study is a multiple-case design, involving more than one participant because “the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (Yin, 2014, p. 57).

For this research study, I conducted one to two interviews with eight former students whom I have previously taught in an AP English class. Other data sources and interview transcripts were collected and analyzed using coding. For data analysis, utilizing multiple sources, maintaining a database, maintaining a chain of evidence and exercising care were of utmost importance. Potential limitations and researcher positionality will also be discussed, but ensuring validity and quality, trustworthiness and experience lend to the soundness of this study.

**Participant recruitment.** Initially, I used purposeful sampling by reaching out to ten former students through a personalized email or message over social media. Patton (2002) contends that purposeful sampling is “a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources” (p. 174). By using my professional social media networks, I was able to connect with former students who met with the criteria of *success* for this study. I chose to use former students who I had a personal relationship with because many of the interview questions asked about implications of race and ethnicity, and I wanted to ensure that the participants were comfortable during the interview process. These ten students maintained a relationship with me after graduation by

initiating a connection on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, or Instagram; therefore, I determined that they personally wanted to continue to have a connection with me after high school graduation.

After I selected participants through my social media connections, I sent each participant either an email or direct message through a social media platform. Each message began with a positive accommodation, such as, “I saw on Facebook that you just became president of your fraternity—congratulations!” Next, although most of my participants were aware of my educational pursuits, I reminded students I recently completed my course work and comprehensive exams, and I was now moving into the dissertation proposal stage of my study. I shared with them my research interests and questions, and why I thought they would be “an excellent person” to include in my study. “An excellent person” included “doing well” in my class (maintaining good grades and earning a “3” or higher on the AP exam). I also referenced college enrollment or completion. Additionally, I reminded students about our interpersonal connections, such as “I remember you were always interested in studying finance—I even remember when you won the stock market war in your AP Economics class” or “I remember how awesome you were in all those theatrical performances” or “I remember how amazing your wedding was.”

The participants in the study and I have maintained a relationship beyond the AP classroom. This is significant in positionality between the researcher and the participants. The participants mostly demonstrated an eagerness to reconnect and share their stories. During the interview process, it became apparent that the dynamics had changed from a teacher-student relationship to more of an older, female “friend.” The participants were

forthcoming in their responses, never demonstrated any hesitancy, and were informal in their use of discourse. For this study, I was mainly interested in hearing their stories, and I did not have pre-conceived ideas of what they would share with me.

Each of the ten I reached out to informally confirmed in a return message or email that they were interested and able to be interviewed in a face to face to face interview during the Winter or Spring of 2017/2018 at a mutually agreeable location. Guba and Lincoln (2005) assert that the most suitable method in interviewing participants where sensitive or difficult topics may arise is through in-person interviews, which are one of the few methods where you can be aware of changes in body language. To ensure quality of the data collected, it was imperative that all the interviews were conducted in the same manner.

After an informal message, I sent each potential participant a formal invitation (Appendix A) to participate in the study. This email identified the purpose and information of the study and included information about their potential involvement. Eight of the potential ten participants responded to the email with agreement to participate and affirmed informed consent. Although all ten participants were eager to be involved, only eight were able to meet for face-to-face interviews due to where they were currently residing. From there, the participants and I informally communicated through email to determine a time and place to meet. Since the participants have significant commitments, I had them choose the date and time, but then I would often suggest meeting in a quiet restaurant where I offered to pay for a meal. Participants were all given IRB information and a consent form that each participant signed.

**Participants.** The present study includes eight students who I have previously taught either AP Literature and Composition or AP Language and Composition, earned a “3” or higher on at least one of the AP exams, maintained a minimum 79.5% in an AP English class, graduated high school, and are either currently enrolled in a postsecondary institution or have graduated from one. Some of the participants have attended or are attending prestigious universities, such as Harvard University, New York University and the University of Maryland, College Park. Others attended or have attended community College, and one attended a prestigious Historically Black College and University (HBCU) school. The age range of these participants at the time of their interviews is 18-32, and all self-identify<sup>17</sup> as male and African American.

The participants attended a high school in a suburb of a major city, and enrollment is close to 2,000 students. The school has a small number of students who are not taught by a highly qualified teacher (less than 5%). The ethnic demographics of the school are in-line with national demographics. Approximately 50% of the students self-identify as White, 30% as Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, Pacific Islander, or two or more races, and 20% as African American. Additionally, close to 80% of students enroll in post-secondary institutions, which is about 10% higher than the national average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). There are very few students who drop out of school, the attendance rate is consistently over 95%, only approximately 12% of students qualify for the Free and Reduced Priced Meals (FARMS), and about 5% receive special education services. In 2016, close to five hundred students sat for an AP exam, and over two hundred and fifty of those were for AP English exams, where

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<sup>17</sup> During the interview, each participant was asked to describe his race or ethnicity. All participants reported “African American” or “Black.”

approximately 75% of students earned a “3” or higher. This school will assume the pseudonym “AP High.”

AP High typically ranks high in comparison to other public high schools’ test scores, graduation rates, and attendance rates. In my personal experience, I have often heard students refer to this school as a “good” school and that parents often choose to live in this district to attend this school. In public rankings, such as in *U.S. News and Reports* and the online school evaluator, *Niche*, AP High typically is rated as one of the top 15% best schools in Maryland. At AP High, over half of students before they graduate take at least one AP course, and over 80% pass at least one AP exam (Niche, 2018). Students do have access to numerous AP courses—approximately twenty different AP courses are run each school year. Students are typically tracked into AP courses from G.T. courses. There are three tracks for most subject areas—standard, honors, and G.T. If students typically are successful in G.T., they are automatically tracked to AP courses. There is flexibility, and honors students are often encouraged to challenge themselves if they demonstrate potential to their teachers or through their test scores. The schedule of classes offered is built around student demand. Students register for classes in December, administrators and guidance counselors work collaboratively to build the schedule, and the schedule is primarily constructed to meet student demand. All students have the ability to enroll in any course they choose. If they are not tracked by a teacher into a course he or she would like to take, the student and his or her parent can complete a waiver to enroll in a course.

For this multiple-case study, I have chosen to use several participants from AP High because the topic has been largely unexplored, and having more than one case study

may provide a higher degree of certainty (Yin, 2014). I used purposeful sampling because I chose these select students whom I have taught and who met with success based on academic records and enrollment or degree completion from a college or university. I chose to use students of different ages to attempt to allow different perspectives on AP English success to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Additionally, the sample size for this study was determined by the participants' interest in being interviewed. Patton (1990) argues "there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry" and that the number of participants depends on "what you want to know and the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 184).

Through leveraging my own relationships with these former students, I was acquainted with all the participants who were considered for this study. The relationships between me and the participants did not seemingly negatively affect data collection because the participants demonstrated eagerness to share their perspectives and appeared comfortable during the interview process.

participant pseudonym	Damien	Oliver	Aahron	Lonnie	Martin	Douglass	Altan	Jai
age at interview	23	22	21	24	33	21	22	28
year graduated from high school	2013	2014	2016	2012	2003	2015	2014	2008
AP Language and Composition score	n/a	4	3	5	5	4	4	3
AP Literature and Composition score	3	3	n/a	5	5	4	5	n/a
higher education	HBCU and community college	a top one hundred, prestigious, state university <sup>18</sup>	a top one hundred, prestigious, state university	a top ten prestigious university	a top ten prestigious university	a top ten prestigious university	a top ten prestigious university	a public, liberal arts university
higher education area of interest, major, or degree	business	engineering	criminal justice	biomedical engineering	drama	engineering	government	communications
graduated from college or university	no	no—projected Spring 2019	no—projected Spring 2020	yes	yes	no--projected Spring 2019	yes	yes
self-described current job, career, or title	student and customer service manager	Student	student	student (currently in graduate school) and biomedical intern	restaurant manager, writer, and actor	student and intern at a large financial institution	government intern	human resources
self-described ethnicity/race	African American	Black	Black	African American	Black	African American	Black	African American
self-described lineage	mother's family from Chicago and father's family from South Carolina, described lineage to "probably slavery times"	Grandparents from Nigeria (both sets), parents born in U.S., participant born in U.S.	"my whole family is from the south" and "according to my grandma, we were slaves"	Grandparents (both sets) lived in New York, describes one set of Great-Grandparents residing in either Georgia or Arkansas, is "not sure" about other Great-Grandparents	parents descended from "the South" and "ancestors were probably slaves"	Participant "is not sure" about his father, but his step-father and mother are from Baltimore, and describes his lineage as "my whole family is from Baltimore"	"my mother and father are Black" and "I've met my mom's and dad's parents and they both grew up and live in Florida—that's all I know"	"my mother and father are Black, and so are my grandparents. I'm pretty sure all my grandparents grew up in Baltimore."
parents' education	both parents completed undergrad	both parents' highest degree--master's degree	both parents did not attend college	both parents did not attend college	father completed undergrad; mother, no college	both parents completed undergrad	both parents did not attend college	mother did not attend college

**Table 3. Participant Demographic**

<sup>18</sup> According to *U.S. News & World Report's* "National University Rankings, 2018."

## **Data Collection**

For data collection, the focus was on interviews. However, Yin (2003) recommends six types of information to collect—documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts to provide multiple sources of evidence and to improve triangulation. For this study, five of the six types (excluding participant observations) were collected and maintained.

**Documents and Archival Records.** Document and archival records for this study consisted of communication between the researcher and participants in archived social media messages or emails, student high school transcripts, student college transcripts, AP score reports from the College Board, SAT score reports from the College Board, statistical data from federal, state, and local sources, educational data, as provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, school report cards, as presented by the county in which AP High resides. These documentation and archival records are precise, quantitative, and broad. They offered repeated review and were not intrusive to view.

**Interviews.** Having a conversation gives insight into that person's world and life. Steinar (1996) argues "an interview's purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 6). Additionally, Marshall and Rossman (1989) contend that "qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal, structured interviews. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's meaning perspective, but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses" (p. 82). Interviewing too is a preferred method in attempting to understand phenomena related to education. Seidman (2013) contends:



The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the “others” who make up the organization or carry out the process. Social abstractions like “education” are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built. (p. 4)

For the purposes of this study, the qualitative research interview was used to attempt to understand themes of the lived world from the subjects’ own perceptions. I used a semi-structured question guide which focused on certain themes, that were influenced by the literature review, but allowed for conversation (Appendix B). I conducted one to two separate interviews for each participant with the goal of approximately 60-90 minutes in length—as suggested by qualitative interview texts written by researcher Schuman (1982) and Jones and Arminio (2013)—which focused on: 1) *Putting the Participant’s Experience in Context*, 2) *The Details*, and 3) *Reflection*. The longest interview was 114 minutes and the shortest interview was 48 minutes. For participants who had two interviews, they were spaced out approximately a week apart to “allow for the participant to mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection” (Seidman, 2013, p. 15).

As for the construction of the interview (Appendix B) itself, I relied on primarily on Steinar Kvale’s (1996) *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* and Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker’s (2001) *Race, Subjectivity, and the Interview Process* to guide the development of my questioning. I wanted to ensure that the interview questions would provide rich data and do justice to their particular stories;

therefore, “reflexively engaging subjects in terms that can capture these complexities of their lives” was of utmost importance (Dunbar et al., p. 171). Additionally, since I was deeply concerned with being culturally sensitive, I recruited five students who had recently graduated (2018) from AP High who were also African American and male to give me feedback on my interview questions. After I finished developing my questions, I gave each of these men a copy of the questions. Together, we went through each question and discussed the intent of each question and analyzed their appropriateness. They were able to provide thoughtful feedback, and some of the original questions were modified.

**Recollections.** For this study, a type of informal observation with my participants had already taken place since I have taught each of these students in an AP English class for a duration of approximately eight months. I am aware that this does not qualify as a direction or participant observation, as outlined by Yin (2003), since my personal observations are not current. Additionally, formal participant observational notes were not taken when I taught the participants; however, I did witness their classroom behaviors and have achievement records, such as academic transcripts and AP reports that document their success.

Although not typically understood as an “observation,” I have seen and observed the participants’ classroom behaviors and have had personal conversations and interactions with them both in and out of the classroom. After each participant informally agreed to be interviewed, I wrote notes about my “remembrances” of these students, so I could have documentation of how an AP English teacher perceived these

successful students without being clouded by future interview data. The notes were anecdotal in nature and focused on observed classroom behaviors and social interactions.

For example:

Participant “O”:

- graduated in 2014
- honor society
- played basketball and ran track
- wore athletic clothes during the school day (had an “athletic style”)
- took pride in showing me his “kicks” and how they coordinated with his outfit
- homecoming king
- wrote a narrative about having a white girlfriend and how it disappointed his father
- mother attended parent-teacher conferences and voiced the importance of reading/college
- parents were married
- often seemed disengaged in class (didn’t raise hand and did not voluntarily join in group/class discussions)
- performed well on assessments and unit tests
- the only student who was African American in the class
- liked Kung Fu movies and liked to talk about food
- seemed to be social and have many friends when I saw him in the school building outside of class
- in collaborative activities in class, he would choose to work with female students who were known athletes
- descriptives: introspective, academic, intuitive, athletic, good sense of humor, popular
- outside of class contact—attended one basketball game (playoffs), edited his college essay, wrote a college recommendation letter
- first post high school contact: friend request initiated by him on Facebook and Instagram, and invitation to join his LinkedIn network (same day)

These notes are not what Yin considers documentation for direct or participant observation. However, these notes helped spark interesting conversations during the interview process. I was the AP English teacher of these students who were successful, so I assumed a special mode of observation, which may provide insight into behavior and motives.

**Artifacts.** For this study, I asked the participants to share with me an artifact that informed their success, particularly in terms of success in AP English. Yin (2014)

proposes that “when relevant, the artifacts can be an important component in the overall case” (p. 117). Artifacts may provide an insight into the culture of the participant or may help illuminate an emerging theme. The directive for this artifact was:

Thank you for your participation in today’s interview. It means a lot to me that you are willing to give up your time and share experiences with me in this way. For our final interview, I am requesting that you bring some sort of artifact that you relate to your experiences in an AP English class. It can be anything you want, and I don’t necessarily need to keep it, but would like to. It could be a song, poem, digital creation, photograph, free-write, painting, sculpture, video, jewelry item, etc. Please don’t limit yourself to this list—bring whatever you think is appropriate. Think of it as you artistically creating a memory of the experience of meeting with success in an AP English class (Appendix C).

Utilizing multiple sources of data allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how these students were successful. Although not all of the participants were able to provide an artifact, most did. Providing an opportunity for participants to illuminate their contexts provided an opportunity to enrich the understandings of the research questions. Additionally, when there are multiple opportunities for data collection, the biases of the researcher can be minimized because I did not rely on a single research approach—interviews.

### **Ensuring Validity and Quality and the Researcher’s Positionality**

In this proposed study, I followed Yin’s (2014) tests for validity in a quality case study:

*Construct Validity:* relied on recognizing correct operation methods being studied, such as using multiple sources of evidence (data sets, interviews of multiple participants, and participant artifacts), established a chain of evidence, and participants reviewed the data after it was collected

*Internal Validity:* insured that the researcher did not identify a causal relationship without knowing there could be an external factor that may be causing a particular

effect and did not make inferences without considering other explanations and possibilities

*External Validity*: relied on the research question, and focused on the “how” and “why”

*Reliability*: documentation

As for replication, the multiple-case study approach allows cases which could predict similar results (a literal replication). However, for this multiple-case study, each participant was considered to be his own individual case study. Then, as Yin (2014) suggests, “each case’s conclusions are then considered to be the information needing replication by other individual cases” (p. 59).

As for quality control, I followed Tracy’s (2010), who is a researcher of communication and has written several articles on maintaining quality in qualitative research, eight indicators of “quality in qualitative research” (p. 837). First she calls for a worthy topic, which has been discussed in the literature review. The topic is “relevant, timely, significant, interesting, evocative,” and has grown from a personal interest and contemporary concern about the marginalization of students who are African American male in AP English courses (p. 340). Tracy also argues that rigor creates face validity and is maintained by the researcher, evidencing his or her “due diligence, exercising appropriate time, effort, care and thoroughness” (p. 841). Special effort was made to determine that there would be enough data from appropriate participants and that the data was collected, maintained, and achieved using proper case study techniques and protocol.

**Self-reflexivity.** Sincerity, which is when the researcher addresses his or her own biases, is also important in a quality study. Tracy (2010) discusses the idea of self-

reflexivity, where researchers are open and honest about their strengths and weaknesses. For this study and for these research questions, I was aware that the positionality of this research, where I am a teacher and a researcher, could be grounded in my predispositions and personal and cultural biases. Another area of concern was that I have a different ethnicity and gender than my participants. I also am significantly older and do not necessarily understand all the nuances of popular culture and AAL, which the participants sometimes referenced and used. However, I did have a positive teacher/student relationships with these participants while they were in secondary school (such as working outside of class on college admissions essays, writing college recommendation letters, attending graduation parties at the participants' homes) and have maintained positive relationships with these students into their adulthoods (such as maintaining relationships through social media, attending weddings, attending theatrical productions, giving feedback on resumes, and discussing graduate school and career options). I also strongly feel that “stories of success” can contribute to having fewer students who are traditionally marginalized from (or in) AP English classes and have a vested interest in seeing all students succeed—it has been my objective in my career for twenty years and I openly discussed this interest with the participants.

As for ethnicity differences, some research has suggested that using a series of interviews can be one way to increase trust between the researcher and his or her participants, especially where there can be a perception of power. Seidman (2013), in his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, contends that using multiple interviews can help in “overcoming the initial distrust that can be present when a European American interviews an African American” (p. 84). He argues that interviewing is not just a

research methodology, but also a social relationship. He contends that “in our society, with its history of racism, researchers and participants of different racial and ethnic background face difficulties in establishing an effective relationship” (p. 83). Therefore, it was advantageous that I developed relationships with these participants that foster mutual respect and understanding.

Additionally, I read and often re-read “Race, Subjectivity, and the Interview Process” in Gubrium and Holstein’s (2001) *Handbook of Interview Research*, which was helpful in remaining mindful of the nuances of culture and ethnicity. This chapter shaped and re-shaped how I engaged in data. This chapter specifically highlights that the interview process and interpretations need to take social and historical factors into consideration at all times. The chapter also helped reinforce my objective of not attempting to standardize the participants and that I was “according the subject all the humanity he or she deserves” (p. 133). Moreover, the chapter also reinforced my belief that the participants needed to be “appreciated rather than trivialized, compartmentalized, or derided” (p. 139). I also considered it especially important for the participants to know we shared common ground—my research was based on something we all experienced—being in an AP English classroom, together, for approximately an hour for one hundred and eighty days. The participants, in some ways, knew me, and I, in some ways, knew them. This chapter also reminded me to be aware of culturally sensitive questions. I often repeated to the participants that if they did not feel comfortable answering any type of question, that they did not need to answer. Overall, this chapter served as a continued reminder of the ethics involved in interviewing racialized youth cultures.

As for the age difference and familiarity with AAL, I believe that teaching young people keeps you in the “here and now.” For approximately 185 days a year, for seven hours a day, I am surrounded by young people and students who use AAL. For me, maintaining positive relationships with students and understanding youth culture has always been a high priority because I believe that it increases student engagement and success. Relatability, to me, has always been an important characteristic of my idea of an effective high school teacher. Interpersonal relationships with students and building positive classroom communities where students feel understood, comfortable, and safe are my priorities as an English teacher. To ensure an understanding of youth culture, I have frequent informal conversations with young people about hair styles, clothes, cars, television shows, books, movies, music, and dance moves. Young people talk to me and share their informal writings about their dreams, hopes, and future goals; they also share their disappointment, fears, and tragedies. I maintain relationships with young people through social media and hear their voices in the classroom on political and social concerns--I have daily conversations with students about what they find important. As for pop culture references and youth slang, I am inundated with these during the school day, and can participate in discussions with students on why a prom dress is “Gucci” instead of “basic,” or on how my nails always look “lit,” or on why Chance the Rapper is better lyrically than Big Sean or Logic, or on the merits of a student staying after for extra help instead of “rolling with his squad.” Besides being acquainted with youth slang and pop culture, I also hear and observe students using AAL to communicate with peers, family members, and even myself. I also have had many opportunities as an English teacher to study, analyze, and teach others about African American literature, especially



in relation to dialects and colloquialisms. As for gender differences, my relationships with my participants may minimize some problems that gender differences can generate. Moreover, the actual topic of this study demonstrate a concern for gender equality in education.

**Researcher bias.** Sincerity, I believe, is also divulging who you are as a researcher. Although I have sincere relationships with my participants, I still have a “cultural lens,” which I not only needed to acknowledge, but also needed to reflect on often when analyzing data. I self-identify as a person who is white and female, and I believe my ethnicity has provided advantages over groups who are often marginalized in the U.S. I also believe that education is important—a significant aspect that can have outcomes that impact every area of one’s life. I also believe in the impact of family and community, and am currently raising a son and actively trying to ensure his “success.” I also acknowledge that I grew up and continue to maintain a socio economic level of privilege, and find it important to be financially stable. Some of my participants have grown up and continue to maintain a lower SES lifestyle, and I may not have been able to necessarily relate to some of their financial struggles. However, by listening closely and following strict coding guidelines, this disconnect was minimalized.

**Position of power.** Additionally, it was important to be aware of the positions of power in this research study because it was not necessarily a reciprocal conversation between two people. My initial relationships with the participants placed me within a formal position of power, since I was their teacher, controlled what information I presented them with, and was solely responsible for translating their learning to a “grade” on a report card—an official school transcript. Power, and how it influences people have

been studied by numerous researchers (Foucault, 1978; Lukes, 1974). However, in this study, “the interviewee possesse[d] the power inherent in having knowledge that another lacks but wants” (p. 322). Power, in my relationship with the participants, has changed since they have matured and distanced themselves from the AP English classroom. All of the participants themselves initiated a casual, social relationship with me through social media or in-person meetings, indicating an element of trust. Most, too, sought advice from me about college or career prospects or invited me to social events where they were a person being celebrated. Although aspects of power were minimized by the researcher, it was important to pay close attention to how power may have been influencing the interview process. For example, if I discussed a student’s grades or how he studied for the AP exam, he may have wanted to “impress” me, so I made sure to allow for multiple opportunities for participants to discuss their perspectives. I was also aware that ethnic, gender, and age differences could contribute to an issue related to societal and cultural issues of power, since I am a white female who is about twenty years older than them. Sincerity in this study was extremely important since I have a lens that is significantly different than all my participants. To create a higher-level of sincerity, I wrote bi-weekly (sometimes more) journal-type reflections on my role as a researcher. Research (Malacrida, 2007; Ortlipp, 2008) has proposed that reflexivity and journaling can combat ethical issues for researchers because they can document experiences, feelings, emotions, opinions, and thoughts during the research process. I typed these and kept them in a separate database for easy referral, and reviewed my responses periodically to keep my lens “in check.”

**Credibility.** Tracy (2010) also maintains that credibility is important to the quality of a research study, which she argues is created by “thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality” (p. 843). My studies of rhetoric as an English teacher did benefit my research in the descriptive sense, since it is important to “show rather than tell” in quality research. Triangulation and crystallization was created by the use of different types and multiple pieces of data. Similarly, multivocality was created through the reliance on multiple participants from different stages in life and my relationships with the participants. Tracy (2010) also suggests that resonance is imperative in qualitative research, which was created by writing and creating an aesthetically pleasing dissertation and aligning findings within a context that could be valuable for other students, parents, educators, and researchers. Findings may be transferable to other populations, such as other AP teachers or other students from different ethnic groups.

Tracy also maintains that significant contribution provides a qualitative study with more value. There is little research on the topic of students who are African American who meet with success in an AP English classroom. This study has significance because it is one of the many areas in U.S. public schools where students are being marginalized and are not getting access to an academic opportunity. This study goes beyond the available literature and attempts to find new theoretical significance for these students. Additionally, this study should also lead to more research, since it is rooted in a contemporary problem.

Ethically, too, this study is sound. The protection of human subjects in research studies is of utmost importance, as suggested by Tracy (2010). Yin (2014) suggests

gaining informed consent, so that participants understand the nature of the case study.

All participants were provided and signed a IRB-approved consent form. Additionally, it was important to protect participants from harm and deception, and also to protect their privacy and confidentiality. It was imperative to use protective measures, such as use pseudonyms for the participants, receive IRB approval, and receive consent before the interview process. During the interview process, I also frequently reminded participants that they did not need to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable and they they could end the interview or decide they did not want to participate at any time.

The final recommendation of Tracy (2010) in creating a sound qualitative study is meaningful coherence, which she describes as a study that achieves its stated purpose, accomplishes what the researchers wanted to do, uses methodology appropriately and within their theoretical paradigm, and connects appropriate literature and academic research. I collected data by relying on my outlined methodology, analyzed the data as described, and wrote a dissertation that meets this idea of meaningful coherence.

**Trustworthiness.** To provide acceptable standards for a research study, it is important to include a variety of validation points for authentication. Padgett (2008) recommends that qualitative researchers utilize six strategies when conducting research—prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing and support, member checking, negative case analysis, and auditing. Most of these strategies were previously discussed. However, prolonged engagement was met because of not only the researcher and participant relationship, but because of the length and depth of the interviews. Triangulation was provided because of the reliance on different data sources. Support was provided by my dissertation committee, and most importantly my chair, Dr. Turner.

I also had support from a peer educator completing a master's degree in leadership in education and a fellow doctoral candidate who is currently also completing her dissertation. Additionally, five young men who were young and African American reviewed my interview questions and offered suggestions for improvement. The participants were recent graduates, all eighteen years old, of AP High. One was a former student of mine; however, the other four were not. All five were officers or active members of an African American scholars' club at AP High and frequently engage in activities to empower young African American men and encourage academic success. They were most helpful in offering suggestions on interview questions that pertained to socio-economics. Feedback from this group suggested that the interview questions were culturally sensitive and not offensive.

**Member checking.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that member checks are one of the most important aspects in assessing trustworthiness, which means the researcher needs to follow up with the participants and determine if his or her findings match with the participants' intentions and meanings. This potentially minimizes researcher bias, gives a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, supports the ethical obligation of the researcher to present unbiased data, and address gaps or areas of confusion (Kornbluh, 2015). Kornbluh (2015), in her contemporary article on establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research, acknowledges that there are some potential limitations in member checks—the tendency of participants to refer to the researcher as the expert and not recognize the value of their feedback, the perception by the participant that the researcher may favor potential outcomes or themes, the

availability of the participants' time to digest the data, the need to establish guidelines for theme comparisons, and the need to address participant feedback in the data analysis.

To limit these issues, Kornbluh (2015) offers suggestions, which I followed in my study. To combat the "expert" issue, I engaged the participants in conversations to clarify that they were the true "experts" in relation to my research interests and questions, and that I was relying on them for my research study. It was also important that they understood that I wanted to hear their voices and understandings related to success. During casual conversation and exchanges, I kept field notes and added them to my database, and paid special attention to issues of power or politics through reflective journaling. To combat the perception of favored themes, I shared the case study and coding process with five of the participants (the other three were not available). Through informal email exchanges, we were able to converse about a few of the emerging themes to determine if they resonated with the participants, which they did. I also emailed the participants copies of their interview transcripts so the participants had an opportunity to review their responses and elaborate if necessary. Only one participant reported that he wanted to elaborate on one of his responses, which he did through an email that I added to the database. Participants were provided with several opportunities to check my findings and provide clarity.

To maximize time with the data, I also asked participants to "artistically create their memory of the experience," which allowed them to create an artifact that voiced their own perceptions or experiences (Kornbluh, 2015, p. 405) (see Appendix C). Finally, I emailed a copy of the specific profile in both Table 3 and their sub-chapter in Chapter 4 to each of the participants to determine if the information presented was correct

and if they believed their anonymity was being maintained. For all the participants, they acknowledged that the data they provided was accurate.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study, my data collection came from multiple sources, but the interviews provided the richest data. Yin (2014) contends that using “the six sources of evidence can be maximized if you follow the four principles of data collection”—use multiple sources of evidence, create a case study database, maintain a chain of evidence, and exercise care when using data from electronic sources.

**Multiple sources.** Using multiple sources of evidence allowed for triangulation, which improved the quality of the data. For example, high school transcripts and AP exam scores were an important aspect of the reliability of the study because they determined whether the students did or did not meet with success. Additionally, interviews provided a profound amount of data, which was given in the participants’ own words. Also, an artifact added an interesting data point since it was chosen and made by the participant, and was able to corroborate themes I found during coding. Multiple sources allowed for a triangulation of data because findings were backed by more than one source, which also contributed to the construct validity (Yin, 2014).

**The coding process.** For all the interviews, I recorded audio conversations on an iPhone X (that were later transcribed) and took notes. The analysis of interview transcripts allowed for an inductive approach for generating data. Patton (1980) contends “inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (p. 306). I used a transcription service, Rev, for audio

transcription. After this service completed each transcription, I listened back to each interview while reading the transcribed audio to check for accuracy. Each transcription was typed in a Microsoft Word document and stored in the password-protected online database, Dropbox. As a precaution to protect that data, the transcriptions were also stored in password-protected Google document. Additionally, a student researcher who is working on a graduate program in educational leadership reviewed the transcribed transcripts for accuracy, reviewed my coding processes, and acted as an editor to increase the reliability of my notes and coding.

As for coding the interview data, I relied primarily on Saldaña's (2013) coding methods. After the transcription process, I first reviewed the data, and coded manually, by hand on a hard copy, to become familiar with the data. Using Saldaña's first cycle coding methods process, I first focused on Exploratory Coding and Initial Coding. This first coding process allowed me to become familiar with the data. I began with a word by word and sentence by sentence analysis, paying special attention to key words and phrases that were used by the participants. From these words and phrases, I was able to compile a bank of approximately 1,000 codes. For example, some of the first codes were divided into nouns and verbal phrases such as "teachers," "expectations," "parents," and "working hard," "doing the right thing," and "trying to be my best." In analyzing the codes that emerged, it was also important for me to note similarities and differences between the participants, which I did by devising a color-coded highlighting system. I also relied on "analytic memos," which are described by Saldaña (2013) as "anything related to and significant about the coding or analysis of data," which were digitally archived (p. 42). Following the detailed coding, I took Creswell and Poth's (2018)



recommendation to help organize data by writing a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, which they describe as *a within-case analysis*. These data sets were collected and stored in a database that was systematic and well-ordered. The interview transcripts were organized with coding and kept separate from field notes and analytical memos. The original coding done by hand was saved, and digital copies of the hand-coding was made into a PDF document and digitally stored. Each coding process was kept and filed in this database to allow for cross comparison. Color-coding themes by hand also allowed for a methodical method of tracking themes. After I completed a within-case analysis for each participant, I conducted, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018) a “cross-case analysis,” which allowed for a thematic comparison between cases in the form of a memo (p. 75).

One area of concern that I encountered when I first coded by hand was the intention to let the participants’ contentions emerge inductively. However, as I began coding, I noticed that themes and topics that emerged during the literature review, such as “prestige in the college application process” or “code-switching” surfaced. Although many of the codes could be linked back to topics in the literature review, I believe that this was primarily due to the thoroughness of the literature review.

After the First Coding cycle, I used Code Mapping as a preliminary analysis before the Second Cycle of coding to create a selected list of categories, themes, and concepts. This was done digitally in a Microsoft Word document I produced. I used color coding, symbols (e.g. “+”), and categories in a two column format (one for the participant’s words and one for coding.)

Next, I coded electronically using a software program, ATLAS.ti 8 MAC. I found this program to be user-friendly and that it intuitively allowed me to code data. When I first began coding the data in this program, I selected interesting words and phrases and made comments in the side bar. Simultaneously, I was able to connect quotations to other participants' responses simply by clicking on data. In the first part of the electronic coding cycle, I focused on Descriptive Coding (Topic Coding) and In Vivo Coding, which Saldaña maintains "is useful in educational ethnographies with youth. The child and adolescent voices are often marginalized and coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult's understandings of their cultures and world views" (p. 91). In the In Vivo coding cycle, I used words and phrases from the participant's own language as a coding method (e.g. "ghetto," "just gotta," "cool," "the game"). I also used Value Coding, which focused on "a participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her world view" (p. 110). This coding provided some of the most significant data because it revealed the participants' distinct values and beliefs, such as "graduation from college is a non-negotiable" and "I didn't care what my friends thought." Furthermore, I used some Causation Coding; however, I was not trying to establish *causation*, but wanted to examine the *influences*, since I attempted to determine what the influences were that led to the effect of "success." Causation Coding, as described by Saldaña (2013) is "appropriate for discerning motives, belief systems, worldviews, processes, recent histories, interrelationships, and the complexity of influences and affects on human actions and phenomena" (p. 165). For Causation Coding, I followed the three-part process to attempt to determine the complexity of their success. For example, an important Causation Code for most of the participants was SUCCESS IN HIGH

SCHOOL > COLLEGE ACCEPTANCE>GRADUATE COLLEGE>SUCCESSFUL LIFE. Another important code was AP ENGLISH>BETTER CHANCE TO ENROLL IN A PRESTIGIOUS COLLEGE>BETTER CAREER.

The Second Coding cycle, utilizing Descriptive, In Vivo, Value, and Causation Coding, allowed for the data to be reorganized and reanalyzed because I could assign selected text as a code with one click. Using the software program also allowed me to concentrate on analytical memos to develop major themes and search for patterns and constructs. I did this by using the “Comments and Memos” feature, which allowed me to make comments, to create analytical notes, to link memos and quotations, and to export memos with linked quotations directly into my written dissertation.

In response to the research questions, there was some overlap in participant responses, especially in relation to Q1, Q2, and Q3 because some of the participants explained their enrollment in AP English and their own “story of success” in relation to their influences, experiences, and practices. Coding for Q1, Q2, and Q3 offered some challenges, but the participants provided rich data, which helped in choosing quotes from the participants that best exemplified each theme. For example, one participant often discussed both his sisters’ impact on enrolling in AP English and signing up to take the exam (Q1); however, his sisters were also instrumental on his success in the class and on the exam (Q2). Furthermore, his sisters were highly influential on his perceptions of AP as a mark of distinction and on his understanding of how AP courses contributed to his possible college acceptance.

**Maintaining a chain of evidence.** Using and maintaining the online database was paramount in retaining a chain of evidence. Data, coding cycles, and memos were

meticulously maintained and organized at all times during data collection and analysis. After the data were collected, coded, and analyzed, the data had to be written and presented in a way that would allow someone outside the study to “follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions” and should be able “to trace the steps in either direction” (Yin, 2014, p. 127).

### **Conclusion**

For this study on students who are African American and male, I primarily relied on interviews to “tell their stories of success” in the AP English classroom. I used multiple sources, including interview transcripts, where I applied coding as my method of analysis to determine emerging themes. Ensuring validity and quality was of utmost importance in the data collection and analysis process. Relying on journaling combatted researcher bias and positions of power.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANT PROFILES AND FINDINGS

### Overview of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and influences of eight participants who are male and African American who enrolled and participated in an AP English class; additionally, this study examined the participants' understanding of how they met with success in an AP English course by earning a "3" or higher on either one of the two AP English exams and maintained a 79.6% (B- or higher) in an AP English course. The purpose was also to explore and survey the perceptions of the influences, experiences, and practices that led to their success and how it may have influenced later academic experiences.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do males who are African American come to enroll in an AP English course? What led them to the point where they decided to register for an AP English class?
2. How do males who are African American explain their own "story of success" in terms of earning a "3" or higher on an AP English exam and by maintaining at least a 79.5% in an AP English course?
3. How do these men who met with success in AP English courses describe the influences, experiences, and practices (from a societal, familial, educational, and cultural perspective) that led to their success?
4. How do the participants believe their success in AP English impacted their later lived experiences, especially as a scholar?

Findings for this study are presented in Chapter 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, each participant is introduced through a participant profile, which was created based on interview responses. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and specific information regarding schools, cities, etc. was eliminated to protect their anonymity. Each participant read over his profile to check for accuracy and to determine if it protected his anonymity to a level with which he he was comfortable. Each profile begins with a significant finding from the data and the participant's artifact (if provided). Most of the artifacts have been digitally edited to protect the participant and his privacy.

### English Tracking Level for Participants

Standard English [least rigorous content]

Honors English [challenging content]

G.T. English (not offered in grade 11 or 12) [most rigorous content]

AP Language and Composition (offered in grade 11) [college-level content]

AP Literature and Composition (offered in grade 12) [college-level content]

Participant	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade
	English Track	English Track	English Track	English Track
Oliver	Honors	Honors	AP	AP
Aahron	Honors	Honors	AP	Honors
Lonnie	GT	GT	AP	AP
Martin	GT	GT	AP	AP
Douglass	GT	GT	AP	AP
Altan	Standard	Honors	AP	AP
Jai	Honors	Honors	AP	Honors
Damien	Honors	Honors	Honors	AP

**Table 4. Tracking Chart of the Participants**

**Douglass**

*“Dispelling stereotypes is fun for me.”*

**Figure 1. Douglass’s artifact (digitally altered to protect anonymity)**

*This is me when I did a presentation for \_\_\_\_<sup>19</sup> [an international engineering firm], you would have been proud of me, I did a really good job presenting my project.*

Douglass is a dynamic, passionate young man who is attending a prestigious university where he majors in engineering and plans to graduate in Spring 2019. He is determined to attend graduate school and has just started the application process. He spent the Summer of 2018 interning at a large financial institution in Baltimore. He has a

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<sup>19</sup> Certain names the participants reference, such as their own names, internships, companies, colleges, and universities, will be omitted to protect anonymity



passion for academics and is proud of his educational successes. He has a close relationship with his family and is the oldest of three children. Douglass described his family as “completely normal,” but explained, “I don’t ever see my biological Dad, but my Step-Dad is really involved in my life. My brother and sister are really my half brother and sister, but I don’t consider them that. My parents aren’t married, but we all live together like we are a regular family.”

Both of Douglass’s parents are college educated and college was always “a where, not an if,” so there “wasn’t even a thought in my head that I wouldn’t try to always get the best grades or be in all AP courses.” Before Douglass’s step-father was in the picture, he remembered his young mother in the kitchen working on coursework to complete her undergraduate degree and taking him with her to class when she could not find a babysitter, “I know it was tough on my mom because she had me so young and didn’t have any help. We lived in a small apartment and she also had to work so she could pay for her tuition and our life.” Douglass recalled reading early and often before he started high school. He remembered liking serial novels such as *Harry Potter* and going to the library with his mother and siblings. He qualified himself as “good reader” even though he contends that he spent a lot of time playing video games and watching television. He also recalled that since sixth grade he was tracked into higher level reading and math groups, “I was always a smart kid because everything came easy to me. I never even studied until high school.” When asked why he was interested in succeeding academically, he maintained that he was competitive, “Remember those summer reading contests at the library? I always remember wanting to be the first kid to read all the books.”

Douglass is quite aware of his physical presence. When we met for our first interview, he literally picked me up off my feet in a bear hug. Douglass was a three season athlete in high school—football, basketball, and baseball. He clarified that now sports are really of no interest to him and were merely a way to make friends, build his confidence and “do something so I wouldn’t be bored.” At 6’7”, Douglass found sports such as basketball “easy.” However, now, he says his sense of humor helps dispel stereotypes people have about tall, African American men:

Someone every day asks me if I play basketball. When I say ‘no,’ they always say, ‘Well, you should.’ It makes me crazy. But, now I’ve decided that dispelling stereotypes is fun for me. I tell them I go to \_\_\_\_—not on a basketball scholarship—and I’m going to be an engineer.

Douglass described his high school experience as dichotomous because “everyone knew my name,” but “I wished I was more open because I really didn’t have much confidence and was my own biggest bully.” He was aware of his popularity and that he was well-liked by both students and staff, but claimed “I only had one real friend who got me, and she was a girl. Not a girlfriend, just my best friend.” One reason he explained that high school held almost two separate realities for him was the ability to perform well academically. He contended, “On one hand, I was cool, had a lot of friends, could talk to anyone, was on sports’ teams—you know. On the other, I was in all AP classes. From my black friends I sometimes felt I wasn’t black enough, so I never really totally felt like I was one of them. I was in different classes and I would mix how I talked with them. My only friend who got that was my best friend.” Douglass compared his experience to his favorite novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, where he describes feeling like Holden,

someone who is male and also has insecurities. Douglass described, “Holden had a lot going on in his head, but to the outside, he probably just seemed like a normal kid. *The Catcher in the Rye* is my favorite book because I could really relate to it.”

Inside the AP English classroom, which Douglass took both junior and senior year of high school, he described his experience as an independent phenomenon where he worked through the content and “did it on my own.” He portrayed himself as quiet, always choosing to sit in a desk in the back of the room, so he could let “the kids who want to talk, talk.” He explained that both his AP English teachers gave him “tough love,” which he described as, “You know, the teachers that are the mom-type, who won’t let you get away with anything because they care, the ones that are no joke.” Douglass pointed out that those teachers are the “best teachers” and those are the type of teachers that can get high school students to be successful and do well on AP exams. He also noted:

English class is usually something you just have to do on your own if you are going to do well. I mean, you can’t have a study group on a book or paper, you just have to read the book and write the paper on your own.

Douglass also implied that female teachers had a significant impact specifically on him, “In high school, black males need to be confident with who they are—this comes from adults around them, especially females.” When asked why females were so important, he claimed that women are more true to themselves and more nurturing, which helped him when he described himself as having “a lot of confusing feelings.”

Douglass was convinced that AP English helped him with the reading and writing he was expected to complete in his collegiate career. He admitted:

I know I was at a good school [college] that's hard to get into, but some of my friends had difficulty keeping up with all the chapters we had to read and all the projects we had to do. I was ready for it and knew how to do it because of AP English. I usually get A's on all my papers and I'm good at editing.

He also affirmed, "AP English definitely helped me get into college. I think those enrollment people see you have gotten a good score on the AP English test, they know you can handle college homework."

Douglass is looking forward to his promising future and to be "financially free" and be able to "put my son through college." He loves mentoring other students and found satisfaction through his role as a teaching assistant and mentor for other engineering students. He claims his sense of humor helps him when he thinks about racial injustices, "You can't get upset. You have to have a sense of humor. I mean come on, I'm a tall, black male named \_\_\_\_\_, I have a lot to prove to the world. But, it's not through basketball, it's through engineering."

**Aahron**

*“I don’t ever want anybody to judge me as ghetto.”*

**Figure 2. Aahron’s artifact (digitally altered to protect anonymity).**

*My biggest success was getting into the University of \_\_\_\_.*

Aahron is a gregarious, loquacious, full-time student studying criminal justice at a prestigious university with a planned graduation year of 2020. Aahron is outgoing and gregarious, and described feeling the most at home when he is “chillin’ with his boys in the fraternity,” which he labeled as an African American Greek fraternity. Growing up, Aahron characterized himself as “really shy, I didn’t do much. I remember reading in my room a lot because my parents were really strict about TV.” Although his parents are divorced and not remarried, they do maintain separate dwellings within the same

community, and growing up, his younger brother and he frequented both houses. Aahron explained, “It was kind of weird and normal at the same time. They were divorced, but they acted married when they were together. My mom always was working that Google calendar and it just worked for us. I had a good childhood except for maybe how strict they were. That’s why I probably went a little wild at the end of high school.”

Aahron did not remember his parents reading, but was required by them to read books and write book reports, “My mom would take me and my brother to the library and we had to write a book report on it once a month or we wouldn’t get our allowance.” Aahron described his upbringing as “sheltered” and “boring,” which he suggested as an influence on him having some issues when he first started college.

In middle school, Aahron remembered that he was tracked in what he calls “middle” classes, which in my determination were actually “honors” classes. “In middle school, I was in the middle classes, not the G.T. I couldn’t even tell you the name of one of my teachers from middle school. In the beginning of high school, I still wasn’t in those classes.” He also recalled:

I remember asking my tenth grade teachers if I could move up to harder classes since I heard from my older cousins that you should be in them to get into college and that they would prepare you more for college. My mom came in and met with my teachers and I got moved up to all harder classes.

Aahron, through self and parental advocacy, moved from those honor classes sophomore year into one AP course junior year—AP English. He maintained that the class was rigorous, “It was the hardest class I have ever taken, and I was alone in there. I

knew I had to do something to help get me into college. My parents didn't go to college, and I know it was important to them.”

He also maintained:

I don't even think my friends knew I was in a AP course; my friends didn't talk about school too much. I struggled through statistics, but my mom helped me in English. She would read the book you assigned us and we would talk about it and she would also read my papers before I turned them in.

Aahron contended that an AP course was paramount for college acceptance, “If I didn't have that class, there's no way I would have gotten into \_\_\_\_.” When asked why he chose AP English over another content area, Aahron implied that he believed that his communication skills would benefit and it would help him with his “image.” Aahron explained:

My image is important. You're not going to get a good job and attract the right people if you sound ignorant. You have to sound professional. A lot of that comes from the way you talk and your vocabulary. I don't ever want anybody to judge me as ghetto. I'm black, so my image is important.

Aahron explained that graduating from college is one of the most important things he will ever do, “Having the best education is important if you are black. I'm trying to beat a stereotype.” The transition to college life offered Aahron some tribulations, “I was almost suspended because of my grades. I was just partying too much and that's what I cared about the most.” Aahron also found his success in high school and AP courses easier to maintain than it was in college because of the teachers:

I also wasn't used to how they teach in college. It's so boring, you just have to

do everything on your own. I didn't have anyone making me do it, so I didn't try hard. Then, I got scared I was going to mess up my life so I just did it. I just taught myself to do it on my own. In AP classes, teachers cared if you would pass the test so they worked really hard to get all the kids to know the stuff. I only passed the AP tests because of the teachers I had."

Aahron described effective English teachers as "caring" and suggests "white teachers need to show black boys that they care, help them with college because most of us have no idea." Aahron explained that he hopes to one day "make a difference" and "give back to my community." When asked about his future, he vowed "I'm black. I love my family, my friends, and my culture. But, being ghetto is what I'm trying to avoid in life."



**Altan**

*“She put her arm around my shoulder and with her other arm, she pointed into the air. Then, she said, ‘\_\_\_, Al, I can picture you walking the stage and graduating from \_\_\_.’ That moment changed my life.”*

**Figure 3. Altan’s artifact**

*Altan looking out at \_\_\_’s campus from his dormitory.*

*Altan explains, “Graduating from \_\_\_ was one of my biggest successes.”*

Driven would be an understatement to describe Altan. Altan, who recently graduated from \_\_\_ and studied government, described his upbringing as “happy, but we didn’t have much.” Altan is the oldest of three children. His parents recently divorced in 2015. Altan reported that his family life has changed a lot over the last few years, but “I’m getting ready to go out on my own.”

Altan explained that most people he knows today cannot believe he was ever a “lazy student who was just happy getting C’s in regular classes” and who also “wasted so much time just playing video games” until “the moment that changed my life” in ninth

grade. Growing up, Altan struggled with his sense of belonging and found it difficult to keep up with his friends. He maintained, “I was always the kid who lived in a townhouse and had the cracked-screen, old phone.”

Altan found his high school freshman year English class engaging, “It was a regular class with a regular teacher, but we finally stopped reading baby books and talked about stuff that was real. I will never forget Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I just liked that class and I talked a lot.” The white teacher of this course was in her last year of a thirty-five year career in teaching purely ninth grade English—she still used an overhead projector and refused to post assignments online. Altan credited her with “lighting a fire under my ass.” When course registration time came, she pulled Altan out into the hall for a private discussion, “She put her arm around my shoulder and with her other arm, she pointed into the air. Then, she said, ‘ \_\_\_\_, Al, I can picture you walking the stage and graduating from \_\_\_\_.’ That moment changed my life.” From there, Altan enrolled in all honors classes, and eventually moved up to AP courses because “I got straight A’s and proved to everyone I could do it.” When asked why he trusted his English teacher when she told him he could graduate from \_\_\_\_, he replied, “I believed her because I knew she was older, and knew how the world worked. She was white, and she knew I needed to learn to play the game if I was going to make something of myself.” He also started working out and taught himself how to play football over the summer of his freshman year by watching YouTube videos. In back-to-school try-outs, he made the varsity team without ever playing a game in his life.

Altan attributed his success in AP English classes and the exams on both the content of the course and the teachers. The content of the eleventh grade AP English course he took primarily relied on U.S. authors and novels, which Altan found intriguing:

I don't think I was aware of it as I am now, but I love the idea of people trying to find the American Dream, which we could, of course, debate is real or not all day. I think this is especially true for a black man, in today's world. But, I do find the theme really interesting and how the world isn't as innocent as we grow up to believe, so I loved the books we read—*The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Death of a Salesman*.

Additionally, Altan found AP English engaging because “This was when I first realized there was more to a book than a book, reading to learn something about the world requires analysis.” Although he did not find the content of the twelfth grade AP course as engaging, “I remember reading *A Tale of Two Cities*, which I love and I remember reading *Invisible Man*, which I only remember because my Dad tried to talk to me about it a lot when I was reading it.” For Altan, he fondly remembered all his high school English teachers, commenting on them each by name, disposition, and even remembering their children's names, “I know I was lucky to have good English teachers, they were the ones that made me successful.” When asked about what made an English teacher “good,” Altan claimed, “When I think about it, they were all similar, older with kids—you know, moms. They cared about you, asked you about football, asked when they could take a look at my college essay because it better be good. I don't think black kids need to have a black teacher—just someone that cares is enough.”

As for the influence on Altan's life, Altan maintained, "I absolutely would not have gotten into \_\_\_ if I did not take AP English—it's a basic." Altan also held a prestigious position on the county's Board of Education during his senior year of high school, which is an appointed role, but students need to compete in a county-wide voting, which is completed after each candidate gives a televised speech. Altan believed:

Being \_\_\_ for the county definitely impressed the people in \_\_\_\_\_. I think I won because my speech was so good. We studied speeches and rhetorical devices in the beginning of the year in AP English, and I used what I learned to help me write my speech, so yeah, AP English absolutely had an affect on my success.

Altan is currently working as an intern in Washington D.C. for the U.S.

Government. He is also attending a prestigious university and is completing his Master's Degree in Government Analytics. He still lives with his family, but maintained, "My next big step is moving out—it's going to be lit."

**Martin**

*“The essay I turned in. She didn’t believe I wrote it. She didn’t believe I could write it.”*

**Figure 4. Martin’s artifact.**

*“No, I regret nothing”*

Martin is a confident, poised \_\_\_ graduate, where he trained at the \_\_\_ School of the Arts. He describes himself as a writer, and has proudly penned and produced two plays, one in which he was a finalist. He has acted in and directed Off-Broadway plays. Currently, he manages a high-end, boutique restaurant in a major metropolitan city because, for him, acting has “lost its luster” and he wanted time to work on his real passion—writing.

Martin grew up in a large city in a predominantly white area and believes he did not have much in common with the other African American students with whom he attended school. He referenced being alone often because his only sibling, a sister, was ten years older than him and his married parents worked a lot, “We definitely were not the Cosby show. It was more like me alone in the house, not allowed to turn on the A.C. because it cost too much money, watching *Revenge of the Nerds*, or reading

*Goosebumps.*” Martin’s parents were older than most of his friends’ parents and he recalls them not being home much and spending a significant amount of time working. Although he references feeling alone, he also discussed how Sundays were an important day in his house beginning with church, moving to him and his sister presenting memorized psalms to the adults of the family, transitioning into a long, family supper, and ending with playing audience to a grandmother’s orations, who, in her youth, was a predominant religious speaker in South Carolina. On these days, his sister (who was usually with friends and too busy for her younger brother) and he would bond, over making fun of their grandmother’s false teeth or how their father fell asleep reading the newspaper after the mid-day supper, “I idolized my sister, I took every word she said as Bible.”

In elementary school, Martin was not aware of being tracked into any specific levels academically. He asserted his most vivid memory in elementary school is what influenced him to become a writer:

I was in fourth grade and I turned in an essay I had written at home for an assignment. The teacher called me out in the hall. She was like, ‘Did you write this? You didn’t write this! You copied this.’ Then, she made me sit in the back of the classroom in this isolated desk, you know, the ones with the walls, and told me, ‘Write the essay again!’ So, I wrote it and gave it to her. I remember being so scared, I wasn’t sure what I had done. I remember sitting there and then realizing she thought I cheated. So, I wrote the essay again. Can you believe she did that? I think she thought I wasn’t smart enough to write a good essay.

In middle school, Martin described himself as shy and not having any male friends, “I had mostly friends that were girls, but we weren’t even that close.” When he was thirteen, he saw a flyer at the library for a drama camp that he brought home and showed his mother. She enrolled him in the camp, which he described as “feeling like I had finally come home.” Martin began reading much more voraciously, and by the time he transitioned into high school, he was tracked into all G.T. classes because of his reading ability and high-level of comprehension. Although he claimed he never liked math or science, he did well in those classes too “because I felt like I had to.”

In high school, Martin continued down the same path, taking gifted and talented classes and AP courses. He knew from his sister “I needed to take as many high-level courses as I could to get into a good college, and I knew that was the end goal. That was it.” Martin also pinpoints high school as a time when he finally felt accepted, and shared his experience in coming out as a homosexual:

I remember sitting down all my friends in the theatre at the end of sophomore year. It was before play practice and I told everyone I was gay. They were all like, ‘Duh!’. I didn’t think they knew, but I guess everyone knew. From that point on, I didn’t hide being gay.

In high school, Martin’s sister acted as a continued role of support—she took him to auditions, helped him complete college applications, and often read his writing assignments. Martin also claimed:

All my friends, all the theatre kids, were all in GT and AP classes. I was fine in them—math and science AP classes were never my thing, but I was able to usually get a B. But, AP English was my favorite class. That was one class

where I felt like I could be myself and we could talk about important issues and everyone had a voice. My AP English teachers were both progressive and they let us all share our opinions; no one was ever wrong.

Martin also recalled doing well on the exam because he enjoyed reading and talking about books in class. He also reasoned he did well on the AP exams because he was a “natural” writer and that it was something that always came easy to him.

Moving into his undergraduate experience, Martin felt as though the transition was easy, “I was ready for college and ready to get out of \_\_\_\_.” Although he had some difficulties remembering the college enrollment process, he did remember “I got into every drama department I applied to, so it came down to the money, who would give me the most money.” Additionally, Martin attributed his academic success over his talent on the stage to what helped him get into prestigious acting programs, “I would say it was absolutely AP courses that got me into those schools, and scoring 5’s on the AP English exams definitely made me stand out as someone who could handle a good school.”

In college, Martin felt that the course work he experienced was not as difficult as he expected, “Honestly, I thought my freshman year was easy. AP courses in high school were harder than my first college classes.” After graduation, Martin returned to his home state where he wrote plays, produced his own work, and continued his acting career. Martin continued writing and acting for about ten years, then decided to quit acting altogether because “It was just too much. They always want someone hotter or younger. I was basically anorexic and not making much money.” Martin now is a manager for a successful restaurant in Baltimore, but explained that he finds the career change “more creative” than it sounds, “I design menus, I research clientele before they arrive so I can



make them feel important, I help in the back with some of the artistry of the food. I actually really enjoy it, and it gives me time during the day to write.”

### **Oliver**

*“I’m going to create an empire.”*

Oliver did not share an artifact.

Oliver has a happy-go-lucky attitude, but takes his studies seriously as an engineering student at \_\_\_\_\_. He describes his parents as strict, which he explains “is typical if your grandparents are from Nigeria.” Oliver has one younger sister who attends the same high school Oliver attended, and describes the way he grew up as “Cramped. Grandparents, parents, and two kids in a townhouse is cramped.” For our interview, I met Oliver at a bustling mall, where we first walked and chit-chatted as he pointed out stores he liked and sneakers in store windows he thought were “lit.” Oliver appeared to be energized by the mall and demonstrated some moments of reserve when we first started our sit-down interview at an eatery in the mall. Oliver explained that clothes, sneakers, hats, and cars were important to him, “They are the building blocks of my empire.” Although he was one of the only participants that initially seemed outwardly nervous, he quickly became very open and forthright once we discussed his family and his successes.

Oliver recalled that his parents often stressed to him and his sister the importance of education, “I knew I went to good schools and had good teachers. My parents wanted us to live there just so I could go to those schools. They always thought education was the most important thing.” Oliver also believed his education is important, but

contended, “It is a means to an end. I’m going to create an empire.” When asked about the empire he wanted to create, he explained, “I’m going to be a successful engineer, make money, have a fly house, and have a family and kids. I want to travel. I look at people like Jay-Z, and I want that. Money is the only way to get that.” Although Oliver sees money as a means to creating his “empire,” he also deeply considers relationships important:

I think the most important person in a black man’s life is his mother or his wife—there’s a lot you can learn from women because they have a different perspective, they see things you don’t see. I grew up thinking my mom talked too much, but you know what I’ve learned? Everything she ever said was true.

Oliver often referenced women as being important influences in his life who contributed to his success. Besides his mother who taught him to “be cool,” which he explained as being respectful and “not burning bridges,” he maintained, “Teachers need to be like a mom to black boys—don’t give up on them; when you think they aren’t listening, they really are. Keep pushing them because most of us want to be successful.”

Oliver remembered liking reading when he was younger and often attended a community center where there was a library. He recalled reading short chapter books in the summer because “there wasn’t much else to do” and his parents closely monitored his screen time. Oliver claims he was a “good kid,” and followed his parents’, especially his mother’s, advice and direction, “I just did whatever my mom asked me to do, I love her and don’t want to let her down.” In middle school, Oliver contends that grades were the most important thing to his parents, “They said, ‘We don’t care what you do, just stay out of trouble and get all A’s and B’s.’ There was not a punishment if I didn’t, but I just did

it anyway.” In high school, Oliver remembers not particularly liking English class, and “forcing” himself to try to do well. He maintained that he was in honors classes freshman and sophomore year, but “knew” he had to take AP classes because of the college credit and that “it looks good for school.”

Oliver speculated that the reason he knew AP classes would help him gain college acceptance was because of his church group. There, he recalls having many discussions with older peers who advised him to take as many AP courses as he could because it would save him money, looked “good,” and got him out of taking rudimentary required classes that were “boring, like English 101.” In high school, Oliver played football, but recalls that he never really talked about school with his football friends, “I had my real friends, and then I just had some friends in my school classes. They were separate.” In AP English class, Oliver remembered only interacting with some of the material, and claimed he “played the grade game” and picked and chose where he focused his energy. He liked novels such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, but for works he had little interest in, such as *The Crucible*, he used online plot summaries to help him do well on assessments “without reading the book.”

Oliver did well in his AP classes getting A’s in both courses and passing both English exams. He credited his success to his teachers “knowing how to get kids to do good.” He claimed both his AP teachers knew the content well and knew how to teach students the skills they needed to be successful on the exams, “I remember always paying extra attention if you said, ‘You guys are going to need to know this if you want to pass the exam.’ You have taught AP for a long time, so I knew when to listen.” Oliver also attributed his success to studying the content “on his own.” He recalled doing most of his

English studying on Sundays because his house was typically quiet. He stated, “To get good grades in English, I just had to do it myself. You just have to sit somewhere quiet and read or write the paper.”

Oliver is planning on a Spring 2019 graduation, and from there, plans on applying to graduate school. He asserts that graduate school will be necessary for him in his career as an engineer. Oliver also commented that AP English has helped him “become a good writer,” and that the skills he learned in those classes has made projects easier for him than his peers. He claimed that many of the students in his engineering program are “not really that good” at writing because they have always focused on math and science. He also asserted that AP English has helped him in presentation projects that he has had to complete in his courses, “I remember those rubrics you used to grade us on for presentations. We were all like, ‘Is she serious?’ But, you were. And, from that, I learned there goes so much into a presentation besides just talking in front of people.”

**Lonnie**

*“I grew up thinking we had to use any means necessary to get into a good school.”*

**Figure 5. Lonnie’s artifact<sup>20</sup> (artifact has been digitally altered to protect anonymity)**

*I’m proud that I earned high scores on my AP exams.*

Lonnie, who graduated from \_\_\_ and is currently working on his master’s degree, attributed his success to having “a diverse skill set,” that he described as “you can’t just be good at one thing, you have to be good at a lot of things.” Just beginning his career at a biomedical company in North Carolina, Lonnie sees the world as a place of possibilities and is “looking forward to many more successes the older I get.”

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<sup>20</sup> Lonnie asked me to take a picture of this plaque hanging T AP High since he is currently out-of-state. The plaque recognizes students who earned at least five “5’s” on AP exams during high school.

The youngest child in a close-knit family, Lonnie contended that following two smart older sisters, who he described as “perfect,” as the catalyst for his success. His parents did not attend college, but believed it was the key for their children’s possible later success, “My parents just were always focused on us all going to college. It was not really a choice for us. We were going.” Lonnie and his older sisters are all approximately a year apart in age, but Lonnie admitted his sisters “babied me and mothered me, but they really got me through high school.”

In elementary school, Lonnie remembered reading books sometimes, but not often. He did not remember learning to read, and had few memories of school. He noted, “I don’t think I have the best memory, but most of the things I remember from my childhood are times with my family or playing with my friends.” However, Lonnie remembered that when he started middle school, his oldest sister told him to try to get placed into G.T. classes so that it would “look better” for college:

I was like in sixth or seventh grade and I remember trying to talk to all my teachers to put me into G.T. classes. They all did because I remember I was in all G.T. classes by eighth grade. I also remember some teachers were not so sure, but I told them I’d work hard and that I would be able to do it.

When Lonnie started high school, he claimed again that his sisters were intent on “molding me into college material.” They helped him plan his schedule, signed him up for football try outs, and “forced” him to attend a \_\_\_ meeting (part of the Black leadership union) the first week of his freshman year “because my sisters said if you want to be president of a club, you have to join right away.” His sisters did not just focus on

academics; they were intent on “making my resume diverse” because “I grew up thinking we had to use any means necessary to get into a good school.”

Lonnie claimed his acceptance to the prestigious \_\_\_ was a “surprise.” He explained that he took all the AP courses his schedule would allow, but “I got B’s in some of them and I know G.P.A. is the most important thing about getting into college. But, I also know that AP classes always trump honors classes, so it’s better that I was in an AP class getting a B.” He also admitted that AP English classes were the hardest for him because “I’m not a good reader” and that his mind works more like “the human calculator, as my friends used to call me.” Lonnie admitted his friends were not in AP courses with him and that he and his friends did not talk about academics often:

The only thing we talked about was trying to get into college, and most of my friends played football and wanted to play in college. I didn’t. I just wanted to get into a good college. I don’t think all my friends knew I was in AP classes.

Our school was so big, sometimes you only saw your friends at lunch or practice.

Lonnie attributed his success in AP English class to his sisters, the content, and the teachers he had for those courses. His sisters showed him how to use online resources to help study content, and he claimed “SparkNotes [online literature resource] helped me get through every book we read.” Although he maintained he was not a “good” reader, Lonnie recalled reading and enjoying *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*, “I remember those books well, *The Great Gatsby* is my favorite book that I have ever read and I even wrote a paper about it in college.” Lonnie also attributed his success in the class and on the exams to his teachers “I had two really good teachers for AP. You guys taught us so much. I really learned everything I needed to know to pass the tests.

And, I think I did really well on papers in college because of you guys.” Lonnie characterized himself as being “quiet” in class, and remembered there “were a lot of white girls in the class.” Lonnie was in fact in a class of thirty students, and he was only one of the five males in the class, and the only student who was African American. Besides his sisters, Lonnie recalled relying mainly on himself to do well in the courses—from scheduling, balancing his time, and seeing his friends—“I did it all on my own.” Furthermore, Lonnie attested that AP courses were the key component of acceptance to \_\_\_\_, “I have no doubt that AP English and high scores on the AP tests helped me get in.”

As for his success at \_\_\_\_, Oliver suggested that AP English classes helped him immensely. He credits the two AP English courses he took in high school as leaning how to prepare for “long-term studying” and for a “comprehensive exam,” which were both “a key to success in college.”

Oliver now happily reported that he is reaching all his goals for himself, especially related to his career. He is proud of his achievements and notably remarked, “Sometimes I can’t believe I made it to grad school. I look around, and I’m like, how did I get here so fast?” When asked about future plans, he shared that he hoped to move back to the area where he grew up to be closer to family, and remarked, “Maybe next is get a girlfriend [laughs]?”



**Jai**

*“I always loved English class—it was the one class I didn’t get in trouble for talking in.”*

Jai did not share an artifact.

Jai currently works in human resources for a hotel in a major city. He graduated approximately ten years ago with a degree in communications from \_\_\_\_, “where I had to grow up fast.” Jai never stops smiling and is a talkative, gregarious, young man who recently got married to a woman he met at work. Before we started our interview, he eagerly gripped my arm as we scrolled through his two hundred plus wedding pictures that I actually attended.

Jai is an only child, and growing up claimed, “It was just me and my mom.” His mother is now married and living in a condominium in Florida. He grew up living in an apartment because “My mom wanted me to go to a good school and we could not afford a house here.” He remembered his mom working a lot, but always keeping close ties, “If I didn’t text her about five times a day she’d have my ass.” Jai remembered much of his childhood being shuffled around to before-care, school, and then after-care, “It wasn’t bad though, I had a lot of friends so it just seemed fun to me.” In school, he claimed he was always in trouble for being a class clown and talking too much, “I just cared about being funny—I couldn’t help it.” He did not recall reading many books when he was young, and attested to watching a lot of television and listening to music, “Music is my thing.” In middle school, Jai was tracked into an honors math class, and “I guess from there, I just started taking more honors classes because my teachers thought I could handle it.”

In high school, Jai continued in his tracked trajectory by taking mostly all honors classes. He explains, “I know I needed to take honors classes to get into college.” Jai took only one AP class in high school which he claimed, “I loved and hated at the same time. I always loved English class—it was the one class I didn’t get in trouble for talking in. But, it was way too much work.” Jai explained his sophomore English teacher was the one who suggested he move up to an AP English course, “She thought it would get me ready for college and that it would help my writing. She knew I needed to become a better writer.” Jai had me as his eleventh grade AP Language and Composition teacher, where he struggled to get a B, and I distinctly recall that he had to get a C or higher on his final exam to get a B for the year because he stayed after school with me every day for two weeks reviewing. Jai was successful in his achievement grade and was also able to pass the exam with a 3. In high school, Jai was popular and typically surrounded by a large groups of friends. Jai did not play sports and was not active in extra-curricular activities. He did maintain a part-time job at a fast food restaurant. Jai asserted that in high school, his friends were the most important aspect of his life, “I was always looking forward to the next party” and “I always was involved in the drama.” As for his peer influence on his academics, most of his friends were in honors classes and he described having difficulty focusing in class because he was always talking to his friends. He distinctly remembers his friends calling him a “nerd” when he told them he was going to take AP English, but described them “backing off” when he explained he was “only doing it to get into college.”

Jai attributed his academic and current success to himself, his mother, and his teachers. Jai asserted, “I got through AP English on my own. I did the work. I pushed

myself to do it; I just sat down and got it done.” Jai also claimed his mother was paramount in getting him on the college track, “I always felt bad that she worked so hard just so I could go to a good school. So, of course, I had to go to college.” His teachers, too, he described as contributing to his success. His tenth grade teacher recommended he take the AP course in eleventh grade, which was his first, and last, AP course. Jai also concluded, “There is no way I could have made it through that class without you. I knew I needed to make friends with you the first day. I remember I could always make you laugh, so you were nice to me and helped me whenever I needed it.” Jai contended that he always tried to become “friends” with his teachers and determined that he was “not the smartest kid,” but thought “if teachers liked me, I thought they would help me out.”

Jai always thought he would be successful. He believed if he worked hard and made the right personal connections that he would be able to attend college. Jai considered graduating from college one of his successes and that taking AP English and passing the exam was helpful into getting him accepted into college, “Colleges love to see that [AP English] on your resume. It makes them think you can handle it.” In his career in the hotel industry, he does not necessarily see a connection to AP English and his position in human resources, “I don’t know if poetry has helped me in working with people.” However, he does believe that the struggles in AP English class junior year of high school helped prepare him for the rigor of college, “I knew how to balance my time and get my reading and papers done because of that [AP English] class.”

**Damien****Figure 6. Damien's artifact**

*“For my artifact, I just took a picture of the Huck Finn book you let me keep. I always say it’s my favorite book and if I ever think about English, it’s the first thing I think about.”*

Damien is an artistic, creative young man who described working at \_\_\_ as “the only way I can support my art addiction.” Damien is currently a customer service manager for a large retail chain and is attending community college and studying business. When asked why he did not study art, he claimed, “Art doesn’t pay the bills, and I think my father would disown me [laughs].”

Damien grew up in close proximity to the schools he attended in elementary through high school, and suggested, “It was nice being close to school, I was pretty involved, so it was always easy to get to school.” Damien described his upbringing as “normal—I lived with my mom and dad, and younger brother.” He also determined,

“We didn’t have much money because my parents wanted me and my brother to grow up in \_\_\_\_ county schools so we could get a good education. Our house was kind of small, but it was fine. My parents both worked a lot, and a lot of our other family lives in Pennsylvania.”

Damien does not remember reading much in elementary school. He claimed to remember reading the *Harry Potter* series at one point, but does not remember how old he was. He asserted that much of his childhood he remembered as “going to school, watching T.V. and doing homework, and spending summers with my grandparents in Pennsylvania.”

In middle school, Damien recalled being tracked into mostly honors classes because “I’m sure my mother made the teachers put me in honors classes;” however, he did not have a recollection of his mother speaking directly to any of his teachers. Damien remembered that his parents always encouraged him to do well in school, but did not feel pressure to be in honors, G.T. or AP classes until high school, “When I think back, they were pretty laid back until high school, but my brother and I were pretty good kids. We didn’t get into much trouble and did what we were told.”

Damien also contended that when he got to high school, “My father all of the sudden became interested in me as a Black man. He made me join \_\_\_\_\_. I had to take honors classes, and he really wanted me to go to a Black college.” In high school, Damien remembers spending a lot of time with his father and younger brother while his mother was pursuing her master’s degree, “He took us all kinds of places so we could learn what it was like to be Black, and what it all meant. He really influenced me a lot those few years.”

In high school, Damien primarily took honors classes, but senior year of high school took AP English, which was suggested by his eleventh grade English teacher, “I’m assuming she just signed me up, because when I got my schedule in the summer, AP English was on it.” Damien claimed that AP English was difficult and that he did not feel prepared for the academic rigor, “I wasn’t ready for the class, but I did manage to get B’s and pass the exam. Don’t ask me how.”

During his senior year, Damien was accepted and enrolled in a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), which is typically rated as one of the top five HBCUs. He felt adjusting to university life was difficult, and left after his first year. Damien claimed, “I just didn’t feel as though I belonged. I got depressed and disinterested in school. The school and the classes were just so big—I felt like I was just floating. I missed my family a lot, too.”

Damien returned home to his family, “I felt like a loser, but I think I really was just depressed. My parents were nice—they were like ‘Why don’t you just work for a few years and see what happens? Maybe you need to take break before you go to school again.’” Damien’s parents’ support helped him through this, which he referred to as a “difficult time.” After a few years of working at the same retail store, he was promoted to leadership positions, and is now the customer service manager. In 2015, he started taking business courses, part-time, at the local community college, which he finds “easy.” He has finished most the undergraduate required courses, such as English and history, and has moved into the end of his coursework, which are mainly business classes. He claimed, “I had to take this entrance test, which was a joke. I mean it seemed like a baby test compared to what we had to do in AP English.” He also determined that the skills he

learned in AP English helped in other courses, too, “I think taking AP English really helped me in school. I mean after that, everything was just easy. I could write really quickly, do papers on anything, and was able to get through the reading.”

As for future successes, Damien determined he was not ready to attend college when he did, “I just wasn’t ready for it. Now, I feel like I’m getting ready to leave the nest. I have saved up money to get an apartment and I’m probably going to transfer into \_\_\_\_\_ for my last two years.” Damien also shared that he was apprehensive about starting school again after being in the work force for a few years, but “It actually came back pretty easy—you worked us hard, and I still could read and write and keep up with my studies pretty easy.”

### **Summary of Findings of the Participants’ Profile**

Each participant was able to provide a summary of their experiences enrolling in AP English, practices that made them successful in the class and on the exam, influences on their success, and implications for future success. Although these profiles offer a limited description of their experiences. Chapter 5 explores more deeply the cross case analyses of each of the described experiences in AP English by the participants.

**CHAPTER FIVE: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND FINDINGS**

For each research question, there were major themes that emerged based on the interpretative analysis of the participants' responses during the interviews. Using the research questions as a controller for the themes, I will discuss the major findings that are affiliated with (Q1), how do the participants who are African American and male come to enroll in an AP English course and what led them to the point where they decided to register for an AP English class?; (Q2) how do African American males explain their own "story of success" in terms of earning a "3" or higher on an AP English exam and by maintaining at least a 79.5% in an AP English course?; (Q3) how do African American males who met with success in AP English courses describe the influences, experiences, and practices that led to their success?; and (Q4) how do participants believe their success in AP English impacted their later, lived experiences, especially as a scholar? As discussed in Chapter 3, there was some overlap in participant responses especially in relation to Q1, Q2, and Q3 because some of the participants explained their enrollment in AP English and their own "story of success" in relation to their influences, experiences, and practices. Coding for Q1, Q2, and Q3 offered some challenges, but repeated coding processes and utilizing a software program helped in streamlining the data. For example, Aahron maintained that his teacher was the most influential on his enrollment in AP English and that his AP teacher was also influential on his success in the class and on the exam. In coding, some responses would overlap in thematic content; however, using multiple coding cycles helped in teasing out the data.

Although each participant's narrative and responses to the interview questions provided individual interpretations of their own understanding of AP English enrollment,



AP English success, the influences on their success, and any perceived benefits of their success, there were many commonalities. The four research questions will guide the cross-theme analysis.

### **Q1: Enrollment in AP English**

For the first research question, I was interested in determining how these eight men came to enroll in AP English in their junior and senior years of high school. First, the participants' teachers and the act of tracking them into upper-level English classes seemingly had the most significant impact. Second, the participants' parents and families had a substantial influence on their enrollment because of high expectations and college attendance as a nonnegotiable. Interestingly, for two participants, their parents were concerned about AP enrollment, but both decided to register for the course because they thought it would influence college acceptance. Third, the participants' awareness of their families' sacrifices also had an impact on enrollment. Fourth, self-motivation and the expectation for themselves to attend college influenced their enrollment in AP English. Finally, for some of the participants, peer discourse in upper-level classes impacted enrollment.

**Teachers.** Throughout the study, the participants' responses revealed that they considered teachers to play the most significant role in tracking them into honors or G.T. English classes in ninth and tenth grade, which eventually influenced their enrollment in AP English classes. Each participant noted that a teacher had either "put" him or "moved" him into an advanced English course at some point in either middle school or high school. Some of the participants were aware that they were in advanced reading

groups as far back as elementary school, but not all the participants could recall what reading groups to which they were assigned.

All the participants had distinct recollections of being tracked into a certain English level beginning in middle school. Douglass recalled, “My fifth grade teacher must have just put me in all G.T. classes and then it just happened from there,” and Aahron remembered, “In sixth grade, I was just in the middle [honors] class—I guess my teacher put me there.” All the participants too could recall the trajectory of their tracking in English courses, down to the exact grade level and teacher, and every participant explained enrolling in AP English as being placed there by an English teacher. However, the experience of being “moved up to AP English” was described in slightly different ways. For some of the participants, they determined that if you were in G.T. English courses in ninth or tenth grade and “got good grades,” your teacher would simply move you up to AP in grade eleven. For other participants, a teacher encouraged them to move up to a higher level, but most of the participants believed that the teachers had the final say on what English track the student was placed. For example, Jai reported, “I remember Mrs. \_\_\_\_ told me she thought I could handle AP. I told her, ‘OK, I can try it.’ And, I think she just put me in the class.” None of the participants reported a guidance counselor as impactful on their enrollment in AP English. All the participants believed it was either a natural form of progression based on teacher-identified ability, or a teacher encouraged them to enroll.

**Parents.** Most of the participants did not suggest a parent initiated enrollment into AP English (such as reaching out to a teacher or guidance counselor to ask about

enrollment) or that a parent completed a waiver<sup>21</sup>. And, although the participants did not directly indicate that their parents helped them come to enroll in AP English, it was the message at home for all these particular participants that they would attend college. From many of the participants' perspectives, AP English was merely one rung on the ladder of getting them to that goal. Damien recalled, "I enrolled in AP English because it was what I thought I needed to do to get into college. That's what it's about. The more AP classes you have, the better chance you have of getting into college." Additionally, several of the participants recalled that their parents "expected" them to take as many AP classes as they could fit into their schedule. Oliver stated, "My parents just expected me to take all the hard classes, so that meant AP. They would never have let me take honors English. They thought AP classes would get me into college." However, for Jai, he explained, "My mom was just happy if I took all honors classes. She thought that was enough to get into college." Parent expectations for their children to take upper-level course work was instrumental in coming to enroll in AP English classes because the participants and their parents believed it would influence college enrollment.

The message at home for all the participants was that they valued education and would attend college. For most of the participants, they were aware that their parents had made sacrifices for their education. A theme that emerged among the participants was that they felt they owed their parents, and that going to college was doing what was expected in exchange for their parents' sacrifices. Douglass postulated, "My parents could have had a bigger house if we lived somewhere else, but they wanted me to go to

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<sup>21</sup> In the school where I teach, parents/guardians can complete a waiver to have their child placed into a course even if it is against a teacher's recommendation. For example, a teacher can recommend a student to take "Honors English 11;" however, a parent can complete a form and his or her child could take "AP Language and Composition." If a parent completes this form, the student is usually enrolled in the course the parents completed the waiver for.

\_\_\_ County schools because they thought they were the best.” All the participants discussed how their parents either strategically located their dwelling in a geographical area so their children could attend a “good” school or made housing sacrifices (such as living in a townhouse in an area that has a high real estate market value versus living in a single-family house in a lower valued real estate market). Altan discussed the impact on his family:

I grew up in \_\_\_\_\_ County, but my parents didn’t think the schools were good enough there. We had a house there, but after second grade we moved to this county and it wasn’t for any other reason than the schools. My parents even picked our townhouse so I could walk to school if I needed to. It did make it convenient because they couldn’t always give me rides.

Jai also reported:

I used to live in the city, but my mom didn’t want me to grow up there. It’s tough to grow up in the city—I mean, what are my options? I would have probably got in with the wrong kids and never went to college. My mom knew that, so we lived in an apartment in \_\_\_\_\_ County so I could go to good schools.

Even Aahron noted that when his parents got divorced, they maintained two separate dwellings in the same school district to make it easier for him and his brother to go back and forth between homes. Aahron reflected on this, “My parents just wanted it [the divorce] to be easy on us, so they lived close by.” The participants were aware that they resided in county where median household income is high. Lonnie referred to it as a “rich county.” Oliver shared this sentiment:

My parents do alright. They make decent money. But, we don't have to live in \_\_\_ County. We could have a much better house if we lived in \_\_\_ County. But, that's why they live in \_\_\_ County. It's all about the schools and trying to get into college. That is really the reason my parents live here.

The participants' understanding of their geographical upbringing largely was attributed to their parents' belief that the schools in the county where the participants attended high school were superior to other schools in the area and could offer them particular advantages.

Interestingly, for two of the participants, parents were reported as being hesitant in AP English enrollment. For these men, they did end up enrolling in the course, but they indicated that their parents were concerned with the balance between the rigor and prestige of taking AP courses and their children's mental health. Jai explained, "She [his mother] actually wasn't so sure I should take AP English. She didn't want me to get overwhelmed. But, I took it anyway." For Lonnie, he explained, "If I didn't take AP English, I don't think my parents would have been mad. They trusted me to make my schedule. They didn't want me to get burned out, but I knew they expected me to take AP classes." For Lonnie and Jai, they explained that their parents did not want them to get "overwhelmed" or "burned out," but did not intercede further in either of the participant's creation of their schedules.

As previously discussed, the participants were aware that their parents had made sacrifices for them to attend schools where they had the most opportunities to become college ready and that they felt they "owed" it to their parents to attend college. Again, these participants determined that taking AP courses in high school would promote a

greater likelihood in college acceptance. Martin reflected, “My parents did a lot for me and all they wanted was for me to turn out OK and go to college. So, I had to go. It wasn’t even a question.” However, other influences on why the participants felt they would attend college differed. For some, such as Jai, his mother did not attend college and he witnessed her financial struggles and difficulties finding a high-earning job without a college diploma. Jai stated, “I had to go to college. What else are you going to do? I didn’t want to work at \_\_\_ for the rest of my life.” For others, they were the second or third generation in their families who would attend college, so to them, it seemed, as Martin said, “It was just expected. Like high school. You just go because it’s [college] what’s next.”

**Self.** For all the participants, the importance of a college education was emphasized at home and church from parents, siblings, cousins, and friends. However, the data also revealed that they personally viewed college attendance as a nonnegotiable, especially since the people in their lives had high expectations for them. All the participants believed taking an AP English course would help them get into a college, so enrolling in AP English was part of an overall “strategy” to gain college acceptance.

Lonnie explained:

You see, if you want to go to a good college, you have to sell yourself. You have to take AP courses, do the SATs, keep that GPA up, play football, be in clubs.

You have to do all that. It’s almost like you are marketing yourself and AP is a piece of the puzzle. It may be messed up, but that’s the game. It’s all a game.

My parents and sisters really talked to me a lot about this all during high school.

For these participants, the message from the people around them was that taking

AP courses would later impact their later college acceptance, which was of paramount personal importance to these men. These messages influenced their enrollment; however, further discussion of the influence of these messages will be discussed in relation to Q2 and Q3.

All the participants have either graduated from college or are currently attending college with the intention of graduation; therefore, the participants' view that college was required was influential on their enrollment. Furthermore, in an attempt to triangulate data, three of the participants' artifact was related to college, the college they attended, or an experience they were able to have through college. College attendance was plainly of paramount importance that they linked to success. Aahron shared a photograph of himself in a college t-shirt and Altan shared a photograph of himself in his dorm room looking out over his college campus. Douglass shared a photograph of himself after giving a presentation at an internship he acquired through his college. Additionally, Lonnie directed me to photograph a plaque at the school he attended, which has his name engraved for earning at least five "5s" on AP exams in high school. He was proud of that achievement, and viewed his successful completion of AP exams as something that lead to enrollment in a prestigious college. For all the participants, college was certainly a necessary part of their path to success, and AP English was part of that process in getting there.

**Peers.** During the coding process, it was apparent that the participants discussed the impact of teachers and their families as the most substantial influence on their decision to enroll in AP English class. However, some of the participants also discussed

how peers, not typically their “friends,” but other students in their classes influenced enrollment in AP. Aahron reflected:

I didn't really talk about how to get into college with my friends. You just heard more about it from the people in your hard classes. You know kids talking, like ‘You should take AP classes, that's what will get you into college.’ Mostly my real friends just said they wanted to go [to college].

Douglass too maintained,

When you are in all G.T. and honors classes, that's how the kids are. That's all they talk about. SAT scores, how to get into a college, getting out of \_\_\_\_.

Getting into good schools. We would all talk about what we were doing to try to get into college.

College discourse among peers in school likely influenced some of the participants in their decision to enroll in AP English because they may have listened to how other students were strategically demonstrating their college readiness to market to potential colleges. For some participants, this also happened outside of school. Oliver shared, “I learned a lot about AP and college from my friends at church. We were all different ages, and the older kids would talk about college a lot. That's where I learned that AP classes would help you get into college.”

For the first research question, how did the participants come to enroll in an AP English class?, the participants cited their English teachers' tracking, parental expectations for college, familial sacrifices, college as a nonnegotiable, self-expectations of college attendance, and peers in upper-level classes as their most significant influences on AP English enrollment.



**Q2: “Stories of Success”**

For the second research question, how did the participants explain their stories of success in earning a 3 or higher on an AP English exam and maintain a 79.5% or higher achievement grade?, participants most frequently noted their self-motivation and resourcefulness as the most significant influence on their success. Also, fundamental to their success were other people in their lives, such as close friends and parents. Lastly, the participants claimed that having caring, expert teachers with experience teaching AP English as essential for their success.

**Self-motivation.** As for the participants’ understanding of maintaining A and B achievement grades in AP English on their report card and passing the AP English exam, most believed they “did it on their own.” Echoing the findings of emerging research on why some students do better than others, other than intelligence, the participants contended that their “get it done” attitude was paramount in being successful. This mindset is described in research as the self-motivation theory of African American students, especially males. Cokley (2003) in his quantitative study that examined motivation toward academic achievement, found that students who were African American were academically motivated. His research has shown that students who are African American and male benefit academically from self-determination. His research has revealed that African American students are intrinsically highly motivated, and when individuals “see themselves as academically and intellectually capable students, and when this idea is reinforced by teachers and family, [...] they are more likely to want to do well in school” (p. 529). Cokley describes self-determination theory as a paramount aspect of academic motivation. He explains that self-determination theory relies on two

particular types of academic behavior, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation relies on the student wanting to know something new, enjoying accomplishing something, and experiencing stimulation when learning something new. Extrinsic motivation relies on the student engaging in behavior he or she determines holds value, determining he or she needs to behave in a certain way, and expecting a punishment or reward for his or her value.

Furthermore, Griffin (2006), in her qualitative study of nine collegiate high achieving students who are African American found that social determination theory was one significant aspect of motivation. Although self-motivation was not the only finding linked to success in this study, she found “students overwhelmingly credited themselves as being their primary source of motivation” (p. 391). However, in her research, she maintains that students use a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic goals, family, and other influences as impactful on motivation. Similar research, such as Hwang, Echols, and Vrongistinos’ (2002) qualitative study on sixty high achieving African American college students found that although intrinsic motivation was a typical characteristic of education motivation, students also “may orchestrate and integrate all sources of motivational factors to optimize their goals” (p. 551).

Although none of the participants used the term “self-motivation” as their descriptor for their mind-set that they used to approach course content and to prepare for the exam, they all used other descriptors that fall under the *self-motivation umbrella*, such as “self-control” (Douglass), “independence” (Martin), “just studied” (Altan), “stuck to my schedule,” (Lonnie) “I did it every Sunday” (Oliver), “I would ask my mom to hold my phone so I won’t be on it” (Jai) “I was organized,” (Damien) and “It sucked to study,

but I knew I just had to do it” (Aahron). This concept of *self-motivation* was of paramount to his success and was eloquently described by Lonnie:

The only way I got good grades in your class [AP English] and passed the test was because I did it myself. I read the books. I wrote the papers. I looked up stuff online if I didn’t know it. I studied for the tests. It was me. When I wanted to go party, or be on my phone, or just chill, I didn’t. I did my work instead. Sometimes it was OK, like I liked reading some of the books and writing some of the papers. But, some stuff was just terrible, like vocabulary words or when we had to learn all those terms. But, in the long run, I just had to get it done. I always had the idea that I needed to do it to get into college.

Douglass, suggested that his family influenced his ambition to do well, he explained:

*Douglass:* My parents were successful people and we talked about that all the time. Work hard. Be successful. I just knew I had to prove it to everyone that I could do it. That I could be successful.

*Interviewer:* Who were you specifically trying to prove it to?

*Douglass:* Everyone. I mean when you are Black, you have to. Teachers. The world. But, my parents, too. I had to prove it to them, too.

*Interviewer:* How do you think being an African American man influenced this?

*Douglass:* You just need to be stronger. You need to work hard. The world isn’t going to hand you anything, and the world doesn’t expect anything, so you need to prove it to everyone you have what it takes to make it.

All of the participants described their success in a similar manner, and only two, Martin and Douglass, actually cited intelligence as a critical factor for their success. Both claimed to be good readers, were always placed in G.T. and AP classes, and did not find maintaining high levels of achievement grades difficult. However, both contended that they had to work to get exemplary grades. Martin specified, “It wasn’t really hard, but you needed to do it to get good grades. I had to do the work.”

In an attempt to triangulate data with an artifact, two of the artifacts that participants submitted can reinforce the idea that the participants relied on themselves to be successful. Lonnie’s artifact of the plaque adequately portrays how his hard work and perseverance contributed to his success. Not many students get their names on that plaque, and students need to work hard in high school to receive that many “5s” on five or more AP exams. Additionally, Martin’s artifact of a large tattoo on his left forearm in French reads, “Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien.” Martin explained that for him, it translates to “No, I regret nothing.” When asked to explain why he chose that artifact, Martin said, “It’s actually a French song that I have always found inspirational. To me, it means to let go of your baggage. Who cares about the shit in your life? Just forget it, and do what’s important to make yourself happy. If you forget about the baggage, you can be successful.” For both of these participants, self-motivation unquestionably contributed to their success.

**Resourcefulness.** In examining the participants’ responses in relation to maintaining success, most claimed they utilized outside resources to complete coursework and prepare for assessments. The impact of other people on their success

will be discussed subsequently, but the participants' resourcefulness could be an extension of their self-motivation.

When participants were asked about how they particularly were successful on assessments on the literature we had studied, most pointed to outside resources that supplemented their learning. Besides reading assigned content, participating in class discussions, and partaking in teacher-led, literary analysis activities in class, most participants admitted viewing the movie version of the text we were studying in close proximity to an assessment—all the participants remembered watching *The Great Gatsby* (there are several film versions) outside of class on their own. Most also remembered viewing *The Crucible*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and some theatrical version of *Moby-Dick*. One participant, Altan disclosed, "I remember there were one or two books we read that didn't have a movie and I'm pretty sure I didn't do too good on those tests."

Besides utilizing film-based versions of the literature we were studying as enrichment, participants also divulged that they relied on student literary study guides such as *CliffsNotes*, *SparkNotes*, and *Shmoop!* to help complete homework, guide literary analysis, and write papers. Lonnie shared his specific study strategy for assessments on literature in AP English as this:

*Lonnie:* First, I would read what you assigned us. Some I'd skim read if it was boring. If I had to do annotations<sup>22</sup>, I would go back and do them later.

*Interviewer:* OK, so what else did you do?

*Lonnie:* Well, after I read or skimmed, then I'd go read the SparkNotes. It has a

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<sup>22</sup> *Annotations* are a frequently assigned homework assignment by English teachers (where I teach) where students make notes, critiques, comments, or ask questions about the text on a memo stick-it and then stick the note on the text. Typically, the teacher will collect their books periodically and assess their annotations.

summary and then goes into some stuff in more depth, so I'd read that.

*Interviewer:* Would you do anything else?

*Lonnie:* Before tests, I'd always watch the movie if there was one and I would take quizzes I could find online. Sometimes you can search for tests on a book, find one, and then go over it with the answer key. That helps you study because it can't be that different from a test you would make. There are a ton of tests online.

Resourcefulness for finding and using enrichment materials for developing literary background and preparing for assessments most likely helped most of the participants in maintaining their achievement grades in AP English.

**Others' influence.** All the participants claimed that they typically did not rely on friends, classmates, tutors, or parents in their specific success in English class and insisted it was due to the "self." However, some of the responses they provided negated their contentions. Two of the participants noted that their parents read the books they were studying and would have discussions at home in reference to what they had read, which possibly could have influenced engagement with the content and understanding of what they were reading. Jai claimed, "My mom was so annoying. She's always buy the book I was reading [in English class] and want to talk about it with me. It was so annoying, but she would understand the book in a way I didn't." Damien also shared that his father would read the books assigned if they were written by African American authors and talk about the book at home in relations to race, "He [his father] always would read those books and then we'd talk about if they were racist and how times have changed."

Some participants had parents, siblings, or friends edit their writing, which could have influenced the grade or score they got on an assignment; thus, impacting their overall course grade. Martin shared that he always had his older sister edit his papers before he turned them in, and he recalled, “there was a lot of red pen on those papers.” Additionally, Douglass had his friend who was also taking AP English edit his writing. Since she had the same AP English teacher as Douglass, she may have influenced his writing because she may have had a deeper understanding of the assignment or specifications of the manner in which the writing was being assessed by the teacher. About half the participants recalled having someone edit their papers at some point in high school; the other half could not remember if they did or not.

Some participants’ parents reportedly influenced their study habits, such as requiring them to complete at-home assignments before being allowed to be with friends or watch television. Aahron shared, “My mom always made me do my homework before I went out. She’d take my phone until I told her I finished everything. I think that helped me because now I still do the same thing.” Most of the participants also reported that their parents monitored their progress in all their classes by checking their achievement grades in the online, web-based grading and learning resource used by the county to maintain records and promote digital learning. Oliver explained, “My parents would check my grades all the time, and we’d always have to talk about any grade I had that wasn’t an A or B. If I got a C on something, they’d make me talk to the teacher to see what I could do to bring it [the achievement grade] up.” Although in response to the direct research questions about how they maintained their success, the participants

claimed they did it themselves; however, when coding their responses, they were also seemingly influenced by the people around them.

Several of the participants suggested that a significant influence on their success was close females in their lives. Here, there was a blur between Q2 and Q3. Lonnie remembered:

Both my sisters had you for AP English, so they gave me the down low on you. They told me I should try to suck up to you because you'd help me if I liked you. You know how you had those writing portfolios? My sister gave me hers and I used it all the time to check my writing.

For Lonnie, he had a distinct advantage in the course because his sisters talked to him about the expectations of the teachers he had and actually gave him course materials that he perused as he went through the course. Douglass also had an advantage by having a close female friend who was also enrolled in AP English:

*Douglass:* Remember my best friend, \_\_\_\_? She had you too, but it was a different period of the day. I had you last period, so when we ate lunch she sometimes told me what you were going to do in class that day.

*Interviewer:* So, like, she would tell you if there was a surprise reading quiz?

*Douglass:* Always. Then, I would review if I needed to. I don't know if you remember this, but we had a bunch of snow days and then you weren't teaching the same thing, like I think her class got behind ours. So I was dying until we got caught up again.

Douglass had a resource that not all students had, which could have influenced his



success. His close friend, who was privy to knowledge such as having a surprise reading quiz that day, shared, almost daily, what was happening in class. Therefore, he had a chance to prepare. Other students may not have had that same resource. Martin, too, was impacted by his older sister, who had taken both AP English classes and was a college graduate. He recalled, “My sister used to read all my papers before I turned them in. She was really helpful in making my writing better.” Both Oliver and Aahron shared that they thought their mothers were highly influential on their success—both of their mothers were teachers in the school system where they attended. Both participants remembered their mothers editing papers and talking about the books they were reading for class.

Although the participants in this study exhibited strong work ethics and did in fact, from my observations, meet the majority of the course requirements on their own as they claimed, they may not have realized or completely understood the impact of people close to them had on their educational self-motivation. For example, since I was their teacher, I know a significant amount of their achievement grades were based on timed, in-class writing assignments and other AP-style assessments. While completing these assessments in class, students were highly monitored and required to complete them in silence, independently, without electric devices, texts, or notes. The participants most likely recall these experiences, such as independently studying for an assessment and then taking the assessment in class, and link those to their achievement grade. Although this is most likely the case, the participants were influenced by the people around them and the expectations they had for them in ways they might not be fully aware.

**Teachers.** For all the participants, the teacher of the AP course was cited as a significant attributable factor for success in AP English—in the forms of achievement

grades and in passing one or both of the AP English exams. All of the participants used the term “caring” or “shows she cares” in descriptors of what makes an effectual English teacher, which they all determined was important to their success.

Predominant researchers in the area of culturally responsive teaching, such as Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) and Gay (2010), found that caring was of utmost importance in effective teaching. Gay defines caring as “*for* instead of *about* the personal well-being and academic success of ethnically diverse students, with a clear understanding that the two are interrelated” (p. 48). Gay also maintains that “*caring about* conveys feelings of concern for one’s state of being, *caring for* is active engagement in doing something to positively affect it. Thus, it encompasses a combination of concern, compassion, commitment, responsibility, and action” (p. 48).

This was clarified by Damien:

*Damien:* A caring teacher shows they care. They come in to class. They know what they are teaching. Like, it’s obvious they know what they are teaching. They get upset if you don’t do well on a quiz. They ask you about your other classes and who you are taking to prom. They are like moms, yeah moms. Moms are the best teachers.

*Interviewer:* So, can you explain more when you say “moms”?

*Damien:* You just know they care. Like it’s almost just in them to care. Like your mom has to care for you and love you. Those are the best teachers. They make class fun, but you know they are serious and that they want you to do good. It’s almost like they look at you like you are their kid. Most of my English

teachers were like that, so that's why I think I got good grades and passed the test [AP English exam].

Other participants described “caring teachers” as the ones who utilize “tough love” (Altan), “are no joke” (Aahron), “will not give up on you” (Jai), “talk to you even when you don't want to talk” (Oliver), “make you laugh” (Lonnie), “aren't high and mighty” (Martin), or “do anything to help you out” (Douglass). It is interesting to note that all the participants first cited themselves as the key to their success; that they had to rely on themselves to get through the content. However, as they discussed the self-perceived autonomous nature of their success, they often interwove the notion of having a “caring” teacher as greatly influential on their success. Aahron described this acutely:

Well, I only ever took that one AP English class with you. And, I barely made it through. I mean if I think about my twelfth grade teacher—she didn't care about us at all—I would have died if she was my AP English teacher. I probably would have just given up or switched back down to honors. But, you cared and I was fine.

Effectual English teachers, for these participants, meant that they demonstrated some level of caring, which was seemingly often demonstrated through interpersonal relationships in and out of the classroom. The only participant who discussed having an ineffectual English teacher referenced his twelfth grade English teacher (he did not take AP English that year) and may have found her ineffectual because “she didn't care about us at all” (Aahron).

Besides the idea of caring, the participants also agreed that having an AP English teacher with a developed content knowledge of English and having a good understanding of the exam was important in their story of success. One participant explained:

*Altan:* I distinctly remember that you knew your stuff. It was like the first week of school, and someone was like, ‘Ms. McArdle, do you remember that part where that character started to go crazy about his niece?’ And, you were like, ‘Go back and look at page 62, I’m making that up [laughs]. No, you said go back to the exact right page and were like, ‘It’s when so and so tells so and so about the girl dancing in the woods.’ We were all like, ‘Damn. She’s got that book memorized.’ You weren’t even holding the book.

*Interviewer:* Was there anything else I did or said that made me seem like I knew what I was doing as a teacher?

*Altan:* Yeah, for the AP part, we all knew you knew that test inside and out. You could answer any question about it, and even would stop and explain why we were learning stuff. You always called it, ‘scalding,’ no that’s not right, ‘scaffing’?

*Interviewer:* Do you mean ‘scaffolding’?

*Altan:* Yes. That’s it. We were always like, ‘What is she talking about?’ But, I knew you were explaining why we were learning it this way. It was all building to something. Oh, yeah. I also remember that you graded some of the exams or worked for AP or something, right?

*Interviewer:* Yes, I worked for two summers scoring essays for the AP Language and Composition exam in Florida.

*Altan:* That's it. You never let us forget that. But, I knew then you were like a judge so you had to know how to teach us to do fine on the exam.

Although no participant used the exact same verbiage to describe their AP English teacher as expert, the participants used phrases such as, "I knew you knew what you were talking about" (Damien), "You just had that reputation" (Lonnie), "My AP teachers had experience, so I just listened to them" (Oliver), and "You always could answer any question" (Jai) to profess that they trusted their AP English teachers to have the content knowledge in order to effectively teach them and prepare them for the AP English exam.

Although most of the participants cited caring and content-expert teachers as crucial to their success, participants also discussed how the experience of the teacher and how long they have been teaching AP English specifically was influential on their success. For example, Oliver got a lower score on his AP Literature and Composition Exam (3) than on his AP Language and Composition (4) exam. Although he was successful, he claimed he did not do as well because "My twelfth grade AP teacher was new at teaching AP, so she didn't really know how to teach us the poetry essay." Martin recalled having me as an AP teacher early in my career, "I remember that you were really young, and I wasn't so sure you'd be able to get us there. But, I remember also having you for ninth grade G.T. English and you were good. So, I liked that you were young because that made class fun, but I wasn't so sure about the AP part."

Furthermore, Aahron and Douglass described mockingly how long I had been teaching AP. Aahron said, "I knew I was in for it when you told use you had been teaching this course for like twenty years. That's when I was like, I better get my ass in gear [laughs]. Obviously, if you weren't doing a good job I'm sure the principal would

pull you out of that class.” Douglass explained, “Everyone knew you were the good AP teacher to get because you have been doing it forever and always got good scores. That was your reputation. The other AP teacher was easier, but if someone got you, they would probably pass [laughs].” Although the participants did not describe how teacher experience directly impacted their success, it was evident that they linked teacher experience in AP English and reputation to effectual teaching, which they all determined may have influenced their success.

As for the influences on success in the AP English classroom and AP English Exam, there were several themes that emerged as impacting a high level of achievement. Self-motivation and resourcefulness was the most predominate theme that emerged in studying the data. Although not recognizably significant to the participants in their discussion of success, others’ influence and caring, expert teachers undoubtedly influence some of their success.

### **Q3: The Influences on AP English Success**

During coding, several themes emerged in relation to the participants’ perception of the influences on their success in AP English and on the exam. As previously discussed, all the participants chiefly enrolled in AP English because they determined it would be helpful in gaining acceptance to a college. They also noted that teachers had a predominant role in their tracking into the course, and that high expectations of the people around them encouraged their enrollment. Both self-motivation and caring, expert, experienced teachers also helped them prepare for the exam and maintain As and Bs for achievement grades. Subsequently, the participants also shared other influences on their success from a societal/educational, familial, and cultural perspective.

**Societal perspectives and “The Educational Game.”** From the participants’ responses, it became evident that they believed that they were going to have successful futures, which chiefly relied on attending and graduating from college. For some, attending a prestigious college was important, but for others, just graduating from college was enough of a precursor to attain success. For all the participants, college was the foundation of becoming successful men. Altan determined, “Without college, there is no way I’d be successful.” When asked about how the participants viewed success most related this to monetary success. Oliver described this as creating an “empire” and Douglass described this as “having a good career, so I don’t have to worry about money.”

All of the participants used either the term “lucky” or “privileged” to describe their educational experience before college and determined that this had a significant impact on their trajectory in enrolling in an AP English course and later attending college and becoming successful. Several of the participants stated they knew they were “lucky” (Jai, Oliver, Lonnie, Altan, and Damien) to go to the schools they attended and were aware that their home life and parents influenced a college mentality. When pressed to describe what “lucky” meant, Lonnie explained, “I know I grew up in a rich area and that I had a good family. Everyone doesn’t have that stuff. I mean I didn’t worry about not being able to eat or anything.” Martin also sustained, “I know I was privileged. I had a good family, a house, went to a decent school, and wasn’t poor. My biggest problems were being gay and wanting to get out of \_\_\_\_.”

Most of the participants also claimed to have generally effectual teachers and fondly remembered many of them. Douglass remembered, “I pretty much had a positive high school experience. My teachers were all pretty good. I really have no complaints.”

Altan maintained, “I had a good time in high school. I really liked my teachers. I think my teachers really impacted who I have become today.” When pressed to reflect on racial implications they may or may not had to confront in school, most could not recall any incidents specifically, but claimed to be aware that there were more white and Asian students in G.T. and AP classes and more African American students in standard classes. Although they acknowledged this discrepancy, Aahron pointed out, “Anybody at our school could go to college. There was always someone there ready to help you if you’d ask. So, I think it would be unfair to blame the school for this issue. Some people just don’t care or don’t want to go [to college]. That’s their fault.”

As for societal influences, some of the participants noted that celebrities such as Jay-Z and Kanye West affected their vision of success. Oliver noted, “Kanye really inspired me. He has everything—music, a clothing line, a family who loves him. He has so much money he can do whatever he wants. I never think I’ll have that much money [laughs]. But, if I could make a lot of money I will think I’m successful.” Additionally, when asked if social media impacted their success in school, most participants responded that it did not have a significant impact. Martin stated, “I love Instagram and I follow a lot of people. But, it’s more fun than anything else. Sometimes I catch myself wanting that life, but then just realize it’s not real. Like I’m never going to be a Kardashian.” Moreover, when asked about specific instances in media coverage and news outlets on the portrayal of African American men, the participants established that it did not have a substantial effect on their success. Altan noted, “You know, I see that stuff on the news. Maybe it should affect me more than it does. It seems like a different world. But I know, I have a lot to prove as a black man and that’s important to me.” Damien reported, “I



think the world is starting to change. I don't think anyone doesn't think Black men can be successful. I mean there are all different people on the news every day doing crazy things. But, I still think we have a lot to do as Black men to make things better."

As for "The Educational Game," most of the participants referred to "playing the game" as an influence on their success. "The [educational] game," as described by Wiggan (2014) in his research on high-performing African American students, was found to be a significant on students' perceptions on maintaining high levels of achievement in academic classes. Wiggan proclaims, "By 'playing the game,' I am referring to the students' lack of conviction that their test scores and grades reflected their intelligence or achievement, yet they harnessed the model because they knew it was crucial to life's chances" (p. 486). Wiggan continues to research high achieving African American students; however, there is little to no research beyond the understanding of "the game" as anything except oppositional identity, as described by Ogbu (1998). More study is needed to understand this phenomenon for contemporary African American students.

The educational "game," which many participants (Lonnie, Jai, Damien, Aahron, and Douglass) discussed as the most important aspect in college acceptance was a crucial influence on their success. Altan described that he learned the educational "game" at school:

*Altan:* I knew after Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ pictured me at \_\_\_\_\_ that I had to pick up my game and learn the game.

*Interviewer:* Can you explain more to me what 'the game' is?

*Altan:* Sure, 'the game' is really just what you do to be successful. Before, I was just going through the motions. Not caring. But, then, I had to change. I had to

play by the rules if I wanted to make the rules. I didn't want to be mediocre, but bettering yourself is figuring out what you need to do it. So, I talked to people. The kids in G.T. classes would talk about this stuff all the time. Like, you need good SAT scores. You better be nice to your AP teachers because you're going to need college rec letters. Like a floater, you can't be a floater. Can I tell you something honest?

*Interviewer:* [Laughs]. Well, I hope you're being honest with me. But, I'm thinking you want to tell me something about me. Don't worry—I'd rather know.

*Altan:* I am [laughs]. Well, don't take this the wrong way, but I was not looking forward to AP English. I remember in the beginning of the year being fake, like in class pretending I was interested in what we were reading and talking to you after class about that stuff. Honestly, I knew that I wanted you to write my college letter so I was being fake so you'd like me. But, I think we ended up getting along and I stopped being fake at some point because you always liked everyone, you liked the kids who had their opinions and would talk in class, so I just started being myself. But, that's what the game is. It's almost like you have to fake it until you make it [laughs].

*Interviewer:* So, why was taking AP English part of 'the game'?

*Altan:* AP English and all APs are part of the game because everyone at school keeps telling you it's what's going to get you into college. You see your older friends get into good colleges and they take all APs even if they don't like the classes. Like for AP English, no one in that class is probably going to go study

English in college, so why do so many kids take it? They know colleges see AP English and they know that you can keep up.

For Altan and many of the other participants, the discourse among peers in honors, G.T. and AP classes influenced what classes they took and their determination to do well in the course and on the exam. Many shared that their peers in these classes would often talk about keeping their G.P.A.s high and passing AP exams as the advantage to college enrollment. For all the participants, except for Martin who went on to study theatre arts and become a playwright, AP English content was not of paramount interest, but found some of the content engaging, especially class discussions.

**Familial Perspectives—“College was always a where, not an if.”** Although the impact of the family and people close to them was discussed at length in both the thematic discussions of Q1 and Q2, the expectation that these men would attend college had a momentous impact on their success in AP English. Growing up with this idea that “college was always a where, not an if,” as stated by Douglass, may have certainly influenced their later success.

All the participants reported that they knew from an early age that their parent(s) expected them to go to college. One area of familial influence that most of the participants conveyed was they learned to value reading as young children. Lonnie reported that he learned to read early, “I think I was three when I started reading.” Douglass remembered being in kindergarten when he learned to read, “I remember clear as day learning to read.” The participants reported liking to read many books in their childhood—*Dr. Seuss*, *Captain Underpants*, *Shel Silverstein*, *The Berenstain Bears*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and *James and the Giant Peach* to name a few. Most of the

participants (Douglass, Aahron, Altan, Lonnie, Martin, and Jai) remembered going to the library with their parents and older siblings. When asked what they did at the library, they remembered attending story time, choosing books to bring home and read, and participating in summer reading competitions. Although the participants did not remember seeing their parents read for pleasure often, as Lonnie acknowledged, “I don’t think my parents had time to read, but I saw my Dad read the newspaper on the weekend.” The participants also remembered reading chapter books in the car, in the evening before going to sleep, and on weekends—Altan recalled, “I read a lot in the car when we had to go places. Otherwise, I’d be bored.” Oliver recollected, “I didn’t have a phone until ninth grade, so I’d read in the car or bring a book with me if we were visiting people and there were no kids to play with.”

Although most of the participants fondly remember reading and going to the library in elementary school, perspectives on reading, especially reading for pleasure, changed significantly in middle school. Damien shared:

*Damien:* I think in middle school you just get too busy to read because of homework.

*Interviewer:* What do you mean? Can you explain that a little more?

*Damien:* Well, I think when you start sixth grade you start being involved more and you have more homework. I don’t remember liking reading anymore once I got to middle school. It was always assigned to you. Books to read. Some of them I actually liked when I got going, but when it is assigned to you it’s work, so you don’t see it the same way.

*Interviewer:* Did you read for pleasure in high school or college?

*Damien:* [Laughs]. Never. I haven't read anything that wasn't from school since I was a little kid.

Most of the other participants reported similar experiences, except for Martin who claimed, "I was always reading something. I always am reading something." Reading emphasized during youth for the participants may have influenced their reading abilities and comprehension, which could have influenced their path to later success, especially in a class such as AP English, where reading ability is of paramount importance.

As for a familial impact on writing, most of the participants were unsure if there was any influence. Most reported that they did most of their writing independently at school or for homework assignments. Over half (Martin, Jai, Oliver, Douglass, and Lonnie) shared one of their friends, a sibling, or a parent would edit their writing before they submitted it to a teacher. None of the participants reported journaling or writing for pleasure except Martin, who shared, "It's important for me to write everyday. You should see all my journals." Most of the participants laughed when I asked them if they kept a journal, diary, or wrote stories. For example, Damien said, "A diary? Are you serious?" and laughed. When pressed on why that would be funny, he stated, "That's not something I would do. I don't think most guys would do that." Although their laughing may have implied that there may view journaling as out of the norm for most males, it was not clear from their responses that this was apparent.

Other familial influences were varied among the participants, but could be grouped together under the theme of communication skills. For example, Lonnie recalled, "My father always told me to look people in the eye when you speak to them. Oh, and say 'Yes, sir.' Yes, Ma'am.' to authority." Jai remembered, "My mom always

told me to feel people out. Start by talking proper, and then when you get to know them, you can be more chill.” Altan asserted, “My parents always told me, ‘Stand up straight and shake hands. Try to talk like you are the authority.’ And, my dad, he always said, “Speak your opinions like truths.” Both Oliver and Lonnie recalled their mothers saying, “Sit still while I’m talking.” Martin also recalled his grandmother teaching him how to listen, “My grandmother said the key to listening to a sermon is repeat in your head the words that are enunciated. That’s how you understand a sermon.” None of the other participants could recall someone teaching them to listen. Communication skills are undoubtedly important in an AP English class where speaking and listening skills are valued. For example, students often engage in collaborative learning, listen to lectures, participate in small and large group discussions, present projects, deliver speeches, and engage in discourse with their teacher and other students. Having developed speaking and listening skills that were honed at home could have positively influenced the participants’ success. Although the participants did not use the terms “code switching” or “talking white” as described Fordham (1999) and by Ogbu (2003), it was apparent that the participants did know they used language differently for different occasions, and that using SAE at certain times could provide them with advantages, such as being respected by someone in a perceived position of power, such as a police officer or a teacher.

**Cultural perspectives--language and Obama.** Most of the participants, when asked about how language affected their success, attributed being able to “sound smart” or “talk proper,” as one of the key ways they could demonstrate their intellect. This, they believed, was recognized by teachers who were ultimately responsible for tracking them into AP English and influential on their success in the class. For example, Altan

remembered his ninth grade teacher pulling him into the hall to tell him she pictured him at \_\_\_\_\_. When asked why he thought she did that, he explained, “I talked a lot in class. Not to friends, but to answer her questions and participate in the class discussions. I think a lot of it had to do with how I talked.” Remarkably, three of the participants, Douglass, Jai, and Oliver noted that President Barack Obama was influential in their understanding of how language worked and how their use of language could influence others’ perceptions. When asked about the language he used in and out of school, Oliver stated:

*Oliver:* I talk proper with my parents most of the time, but with my friends, I talk more chill. Use slang. But, I have a mix of friends, Black, white, Asian. We all talk slang when we aren’t in school or talking to older people. I don’t think it’s a black or white thing. Ever since Obama, it hasn’t been that way. Which is good. But, to connect it back to AP English, I think you learn to speak better in that class and I think that’s important to you becoming successful.

When asked about his perception of speaking, Jai maintained:

*Jai:* President Obama really changed how everyone sees Black men and that Black men can be smart and talk like they are educated. He changed how people view it because no one said he talked white; it wasn’t about that. They just said he talked like he was smart. So, that’s how I try to talk when I want to sound educated. I think it’s old to think people talk Black or white. It’s not that anymore.

In a discussion about language and school, Douglass conveyed how he viewed speaking “proper:”

*Douglass:* To me it’s not about speaking white, it’s just that you can talk proper. Kids don’t really say that anymore. I remember someone said that to me in like fourth grade.

*Interviewer:* Said what?

*Douglass:* That I talked white. But, for work and school, that’s just how you need to talk. That’s a thing around the world, in every culture. If you sound proper, then you are educated. That’s what gets you the leg up, education. You know who changed that, I think? Obama. He is smart and he became president because of that. No one cared he was Black if he was smart. I don’t think people care anymore if your Black or not because we have changed so much as a country. Are white people even a majority still? I don’t think so. No, talking proper is not the same thing anymore as talking white. It’s just educated.

Additionally, one participant, Aahron, was particularly interested in clarifying how he uses language, and that it goes beyond what many linguistic educational researchers, such as Canagarajah (2006) propose is a linguistic division and an aspect of “Acting White.” Aahron discussed changing his language more as “code-meshing” as described by Young (2014) as the “blending, merging, meshing dialects” and “the emotional, psychological, and linguistic dilemmas that code-switching—separating Englishes according to setting” (p. 465):

*Aahron:* So, let me just break down how I talk so you can understand it.

*Interviewer:* Great—break it down.



*Aahron:* I don't know how many levels there are, but there are a lot. You change the way you talk on all these levels.

*Interviewer:* OK, just describe the levels for me.

*Aahron:* OK, first there is the most proper. That's what you use in a job interview. You say things like 'Sir,' and 'I desire to work for a company with your reputation.' You want to seem respectful and smart to get a job. Then there's the way you talk to teachers or police. Just educated so you don't seem ghetto. Then, there's other adults, like your parents or you [indicating me]. You don't have to sound so smart because you know me. I can say 'chill' and you know what I mean. You can be relaxed because you are not getting judged. Then there's the way you talk to people in class. That's just normal, like everyone is the same age so everyone gets what everyone else is talking about. Like to you [indicating me] I'd say, 'cool,' but to people in class, I'd say 'lit.' Then there's the brothers, my peoples. Like the guys in my fraternity. We are the same age, like the same stuff, are Black, and go to the same school. We talk in a way my parents are like, 'What?'. We don't judge each other and just want to have fun. We joke and use a lot of slang.

*Interviewer:* So, I think that was like five or six levels you described, but I get it.

*Aarhon:* Yeah, it has nothing to do with talking Black. These levels are probably the same for everyone.

For these participants, language may be slowly transcending racial or ethnic stereotypes, and evolving to more to a part of an educational or socioeconomic part of one's identity. Researchers such as Young (2014) maintains "code-switching contributes

to the subordinated gender status of African American men” (p. 465). However, based on Aarhon’s explanation for code-switching, it may have more to do with how one views he is perceived by others regardless of ethnicity. Aarhon, when asked to clarify the term “ghetto,” which he referenced almost twenty times in his interview explained, “Anyone can be ‘ghetto.’ White. Black. Whatever. It’s just someone who is lazy, going no where, uneducated. It could be a ‘red neck.’ To me a ‘red neck’ is ‘ghetto.’”

**Further cultural implications.** When the participants were asked specifically about their experiences in AP English in relation to be African American and male, most declared they could not remember anything specific in relation to their ethnicity, but there were some remembrances of stereotypes and prejudice in their educational career in general. For example, although dating back to his elementary school experience, Douglass remembered in fourth grade the racial implication of being told by a friend who was African American that “he talked white.” When asked how this made him feel, he replied, “It’s not really something I heard a lot after that. I remember it, but I know that’s just a thing Black men encounter if someone is ignorant.”

Several of the participants pointed out that their “real” friends typically were not in AP English, and sometimes they felt isolated in school. Altan shared, “None of my real friends were in AP, so I was kind of alone in there. It probably actually helped because I would get distracted by my real friends if they were in the same class. Being alone probably helped me focus.” When compelled to describe his “real friends,” he explained, “my real friends were mostly Black, some took honors or regular. No one took AP.” Jai also shared, “None of my friends were in AP English. I was pretty much

friends with everybody, but my real boys were Black. I talk too much with my friends if they are in my class, so I was pretty much alone in there.”

Most of the participants, except Martin, reported that they did not think their friends were even aware that they were in AP English classes. Thus, they claimed that friends did not make fun of them or tease them for being in AP English. When pressed to reflect on their experiences of being the only or few African American males in an AP English class, most contended that the positive school culture and climate did much to negate possible racial tensions. Lonnie reflected, “Our school was pretty progressive. I never felt like my teachers thought anything about me because I was Black. And, I never even had a Black teacher.” Jai said, “I think we had a good school because people really just accepted each other. I think in \_\_\_\_ County it’s less about race and more about money.” In class too, some participants recalled curriculum that encompassed racial implications. Damien remembered, “I liked when you taught *Huck Finn*. I remember we had a huge class discussion on the N-word and talked about it a lot. I was glad you were teaching white kids the history of that word so they could get it.” Although most participants determined that they did not have many negative racial implications, they were all aware of the racial aspects that did exist in high school. Aahron reported, “The biggest place you see anything that has to do with race in the cafeteria. It’s like at every table is a different race, the Indian kids, the white kids, the Black kids. You know. But, in class, it’s just all mixed up. Still, my closest friends in high school and college are Black.”

In an attempt to triangulate the data, one participant’s artifact, Damien’s photograph of the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, carries racial implications

of what happened inside an AP English classroom for this participant. In my recollection and in Damien's corroboration of my recollection, I had let Damien keep the school-provided book after we finished studying it because I thought it had particular value to him. In the beginning of the unit, I distinctly remember him asking if he should buy his own copy of the book so he could make notes in it. I recall telling him to just make notes in the book I gave him and I would let him keep it (I did this so if referencing a certain page, all students would have the same edition). Damien shared:

I remember going home and telling my Dad we were going to read *Huck Finn* in English. I can picture him now taking off his glasses, which he did when he wanted to listen to me. I remember him asking, 'what does your white English teacher know about being a slave?' And, I remember him asking, 'what do you think if your teacher says the N-word?' except he said the full word. We talked about the book a lot and everything that it meant. I was happy when you started the book though because you talked a lot about the book and all the racial implications and stereotypes. You told us about Mark Twain and how he was using this book to combat racial things. I also remember learning about the N-word and its history. I don't know if all teachers could pull that off, but I remember feeling like you were on my side.

The novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* carries importance for Damien and made connections to the implications and his understanding of race. The novel was discussed at home with both the implications of a "white lady" teaching a book about racial injustices for African Americans (especially in the south) and also the content and messages of Twain's writing. Although Damien did not express surprise in how his AP

English teacher included discussion and instruction on race and stereotypes, he did imply that the novel was taught within a vacuum of respect for race and within the context of understanding more about race, racial tensions in the South in the Civil War era, and the implications and historical nuances of the N-word. During the interview, Damien reported that *Huck Finn* was his favorite novel and that he “learned a lot about my history” from the book. Although Damien’s responses to some of the interview questions in reference to this topic crossed themes with other research questions, it is clear that a teacher’s ability to teach through an appropriate cultural lens of racial appreciation and understanding undoubtedly contributes to the effectiveness of a teacher reaching students. In this case, it seems as though the participant connected to this novel and was appreciative of how the material was presented by the teacher. However, this may not always be the case for all students who are African American and male.

As for gender, the participants reported mixed experiences. For some, they did not believe gender influenced their success in AP English. Most did note that there were fewer males in AP English classes, but beyond noticing the number, did not recall any significant influence. For some, such as Aahron, Lonnie, Damien, and Oliver, they asserted that female English teachers “favored” female students over male students, but that was something that could be overcome. Aahron said, “Female teachers just like girls better. They always favor them. Probably because they don’t act so crazy.” Damien explained:

*Damien:* Most English teachers are women. I think that’s just normal because women like books more than guys do. Well, actually, I think most teachers are female. Is that true?

*Interviewer:* Yes, that's true—especially before college. Do you think AP English or your success in AP English would be different if you had a male English teacher or an African American teacher?

*Damien:* I don't think so. Actually, no. I liked all my English teachers and I actually liked that they were women. I think it makes them nicer.

*Interviewer:* What did you think about being one of the few males in your English class that you had with me?

*Damien:* I didn't care. But, it seemed at first you liked the girls better because you would talk to them more. But, then I remember you'd come around when we were working and you always talked to me. Tried to see what's up. When I knew you liked me, I talked more in class.

Overall, the participants in this study were able to not let their gender or ethnicity differences from the typical AP English student affect their success in AP English. Lonnie reported, "When it comes down to it, you just need to have a sense of humor and not take yourself too seriously. Of course there is stuff that's messed up in this world. But you gotta keep things positive."

#### **Q4: AP English Impact**

In trying to determine *why* these men thought high achievement grades and passing the AP exam was important, they all established that going to college was the principal reason for their persistence. Altan claimed, "Taking and passing AP English looks so good for college" and Jai recalled, "The only real reason I did it was for college." This college-oriented mindset was one they all shared. In reviewing the participants' responses when asked if being successful in AP English and passing the

exam had any impact on their college acceptance, the participants were resolute—“absolutely” and “no doubt” being the most frequent responses of the class’s impact on acceptance.

Although the participants were convinced that success in AP English was highly influential in college acceptance, I also wanted to determine the perceived effect, if any, the course had after high school, especially in their collegiate academics. During the interview data gathering, the semi-structured questions format lent itself well to this endeavor because it helped to streamline questions to their personal areas of study in their undergraduate pursuits. To simplify the ELA curriculum for the participants, I suggested during the interview that English class basically encompassed reading and analyzing literature, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills. The participants agreed that in high school, that was typically what they spent their time doing in English class. They also agreed that AP English was more rigorous than other English classes they had to take, and that it required an outside investment of time to be successful.

**Literature.** Much to the chagrin of the researcher, few of the participants recalled enjoying and actively engaging with literature or poetry. Martin was the only participant whose future academic pursuits were rooted in the humanities and said, “I loved everything we read—I remember so much of it and it was twenty years ago.” Most of the participants could recall the names of novels that were studied in AP course work, and some, such as Altan, remembered being interested in the themes studied, such as the American Dream. Only two participants (Martin and Jai) recalled studying poetry.

Nevertheless, most participants claimed that they read their favorite book in AP English, which according to three of the participants was *The Great Gatsby*. However,

the importance or influence of this is unclear because only one of the participants currently claim to read for pleasure due to time constraints or academic responsibilities. Hence, the novels they studied in high school may have been the last interaction they have had with literature.

As for the reading aspect of studying literature, the participants reported that taking AP English helped bolster their reading stamina and comprehension of text. Douglass shared, “I was ready for all the reading I had to do in college because of AP English.” Similarly, Lonnie reported, “We had to read so much in AP English. So, when I had to read in college, it was no big deal. I could keep up with the reading. I only remember one history class freshman year struggling with the reading.”

Most of the participants (except Martin), reported that literature did not hold any significant role in their lives. When asked about current reading habits, most reported that anything they read typically were assigned readings for college. Although most did not admit to reading for pleasure, Douglass did remember reading *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* (a popular finance book), by Robert Kiyosaki, last summer. And, Lonnie reported, “I sometimes will flip through a graphic novel, but I never really finish them.”

Although the participants did not seem to have much time in their current lives for reading, it was interesting that some of the participants expressed hope in having more time in the future to read for pleasure. Altan shared, “I’m so busy now, but I know when I’m older I’m going to read books again.”

**Writing.** As for literature and poetry, the participants infrequently thought there was any connection to their future academics besides building reading stamina. However, the writing aspect of the course was clearly valuable to most of the



participants. Douglass, Altan, Lonnie, and Aahron contended the most significant impact on their college success was the writing skills they developed in AP English. These four participants all answered “learning to write” as the most important influence on their success in college. Oliver explained how the writing skills he learned in AP English impacted his success in college:

*Oliver:* I think the biggest thing from AP English was all the writing. Before that class I did what I call “bull shit.” Just wrote down stuff that I hoped answered the question and did fine. But, you can’t do that in AP.

*Interviewer:* Why not? Why couldn’t you B.S.?

*Oliver:* Well, you can’t do that in AP because that’s the important part. Do you remember how you gave us a first essay? A one. That’s what I got on my first essay. I was, like, in shock. I never got that low of a grade on anything. Then, we learned how to do everything and I slowly got better. Like, I really had to learn how to write. I had to learn how to break it all down and build it back up.

*Interviewer:* So why was writing the “biggest thing” for college?

*Oliver:* Are you serious? You know how much you have to write in college. For real, that’s all you do and you have to be able to write good or there’s no way you can pass. All I do is write papers. Some of my friends really struggle. They take forever to write a paper. But, I’ve got that down. I definitely learned how to do that in AP English. It’s not the same type of writing, like I don’t have to do that analysis, but it’s just writing in general. I’m good at writing now.

Lonnie also shared, “I really didn’t know how to write until AP English. I learned everything about writing in that class and it totally helped in college. I had to do a lot of writing.” For Martin too, who is a published playwright, writing skills he learned in AP English were important for his success in college, “I wrote plays and could do creative writing before AP English, and like, write a basic essay. But, in AP English I learned how to write and analyze, and also how to argue. That’s a whole different skill set that I needed to learn for college.” Undoubtedly, for the participants in this study, an emphasis on writing skills influenced their perceived success in college because writing assignments were a primarily an assessment tool for the colleges these participants attended.

**Communication.** Several of the participants remembered liking AP English classes, but typically did not reference enjoying reading or writing. For the most part, participants suggested they “liked” AP English because “We had good discussions” (Martin), “I could share my opinions” (Lonnie), “We could talk about big ideas,” (Altan), or “I liked to argue” (Jai). Community discourse in the class apparently was more interesting to the participants than the literature and composing aspects.

During the interviews, I asked participants what the difference between AP English and other AP courses they took in respect to the content. Lonnie articulately shared his perspective:

Well, AP English helps you be a better communicator, you know, speaking and writing. That I knew. But, poetry and books were not important because I always knew I wanted to do something in science. So, my science and math AP classes

were way more important because they would be the base of what I was going to do.

Along that same thread, Oliver, another participant who is studying engineering, shared:

My AP English classes weren't that important to me. I liked class discussions and talking about things I was interested in, but other AP classes were going to help me with what I wanted to study in college. Engineering. I mean, no offense, but how was *The Awakening* [laughs] going to help me become an engineer?

### **Summary**

Damien, Oliver, Aahron, Lonnie, Martin, Douglass, Altan, and Jai share both similar and different lived experiences in relation to enrolling in AP English, finding success in AP English, influencing contributors to success, and affecting later experiences, especially as a scholar. For all the participants, enrollment in college or a university as a prerequisite for later success was of paramount importance. All the participants were influenced and encouraged by people around them, such as family, friends, and a church community to attend college. Successful completion of AP English and the exam was often touted as a token that would help them in their marketing of themselves to potential colleges. All the participants demonstrated several aspects of self-motivation, the get-it-done attitude where one relies primarily on oneself. The participants mainly credit their personal motivation to their success, but also maintained that teachers, parental sacrifices, and peers heavily impacted their success. The participants were also aware and played "the educational game," where they knew they had to do to effectively market themselves to gain acceptance to a prestigious college or university. This was often supported by family members. Although some participants

were aware of ethnic, cultural, and gender differences inside the AP English classroom, most did not claim to have seen or felt a negative impact. Most agreed they just needed to take on AP English and the course work on their own. Most also believed maintaining a sense of humor was important in not letting social injustices get in their way of finding success. Finally, the later impact of success in AP English classes for the participants had an impact on their later academic success. First, most of the participants agreed that AP English taught them invaluable writing skills that prepared them for college-level writing and rigor. Second, participants established that presentations skills, especially in academic speaking, was honed in AP English. Although not the participants did seem to fondly remember much of the literature or poetry, most participants did read the assigned novels and felt prepared for the reading stamina they would need to successfully keep up with their coursework in college. In the next chapter, I will conclude the the implications of these findings and a discussion of limitations and recommendations for further study.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

### Overview of the Study

When I began this research, I wanted to tell the stories of former successful AP English students who are African American and male. The purpose of this research study was to examine the experiences and influences of eight participants who enrolled and participated in an AP English class; additionally, this study examined the participants' understandings of how they met with success in an AP English course by earning a "3" or higher on either one of the two AP English exams and maintained a 79.6% (B- or higher) in an AP English course. The purpose was also to explore and survey the perceptions of the influences, experiences, and practices that led to their success and how it may have influenced later academic experiences.

The research questions that guided this study were: 1. How do males who are African American come to enroll in an AP English course? What led them to the point where they decided to register for an AP English class?, 2. How do males who are African American explain their own "story of success" in terms of earning a "3" or higher on an AP English exam and by maintaining at least a 79.5% in an AP English course?, 3. How do these men who met with success in AP English courses describe the influences, experiences, and practices (from a societal, familial, educational, and cultural perspective) that led to their success?, 4. How do the participants believe their success in AP English impacted their later lived experiences, especially as a scholar?

Through my own observations and experiences as an AP English teacher, I had come to question the absence of male students who were African American in my classroom and question why so few were successful on an AP English exam. Through

my continued relationships with the participants into their early adulthoods, I was able to maintain a presence in their lives. Through this research, I hoped to give them a voice of their own understanding of their personal and academic success related to AP English. Eight young men who were former AP English students of mine served as individual cases for this qualitative study. Each participant completed in-depth interviews and most provided an artifact that illuminated their AP English success. Participants shared their perceived experiences and influences both in and out of the AP English classroom. Individual and cross-case analyses were performed to determine themes. In the previous two chapters, the presentation and analysis of data were reported in a case-by-case basis followed by themes that emerged during coding in relation to each research question.

Research continues to demonstrate that there is a severe under identification of African American students in both gifted and talented courses and AP classrooms (The College Board, 2017; Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Ford & Whiting, 2010; Grantham, 2011; Klugman, 2013; Warne, Larsen, Anderson, & Odasso, 2015). Worse, research shows that less than half of African American male students are in gifted and talented courses or AP classes because “Black male student enrollment is roughly 9%, yet less than 4% of those placed in gifted and talented programs are Black males” (Grantham, 2011, p. 265). This under-enrollment is not just an exclusionary practice and contributing to the achievement gap, but also adds to the “lower educational attainment of already underrepresented minorities in higher education” (Barnard-Brak, McGaha-Garnett, & Burley, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, students who are African American and male need to be better represented in AP courses.

Research has shown that “students who take an Advanced Placement Exam in high school tend to earn higher grades in college than students who do not,” which would likely contribute to a better chance at college graduation (Godfrey, Wyatt, & Beard, 2016, p. 9). In 2015, more than half (59%) of U.S. adults had completed college, and only 22.5% of adults who were African American had earned a bachelor’s degree or more (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The college completion gap between adults who are African American and white, which has “maintained stable, between 11 and 14 percentage points from 1988 to 2015,” has been resistant to change (p. 6). Education level is a strong predictor of most people’s (who reside in the U.S.) earnings, their ability to provide housing (which effects where children go to school), and upward mobility. Although earnings and college degrees do not necessarily ensure intelligence, men who are African American can clearly benefit from college completion. Deeper study is needed to ensure the upward mobility of African American men. Schools need to be financed in a way that is more equitable to ensure that the access to high quality teachers is provided for all students. Students should also be provided with equal access to rigorous, college-level courses.

In this chapter, I will summarize my findings and explore the implications for research, educational practices, and policies that may help to improve AP English enrollment and AP exam scores for students who are African American and male. Additionally, I will discuss the limitations of the study and how the findings may inform future educational research.

## Findings

The findings discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 provide the framework for the discoveries in this study. There were several factors that influenced the participants' enrollment and success in AP English, and all the participants believed AP English had an impact on college acceptance and collegiate success.

**College as a nonnegotiable.** The expectation of college attendance and completion by the people surrounding the participants had the most influence on them enrolling in AP English courses. Participants determined that teachers had tracked them into rigorous courses, which they thought would assist in college acceptance. However, familial support and academic expectations were just as important. For all the participants, family and the people close to them provided positive discourse about academic success and motivated the young men to succeed. The participants all determined that college as a nonnegotiable was paramount in enrolling in AP courses because AP courses were seen as the precursor to and influencer on college matriculation. College enrollment was important for these participants because it was seen as a stepping stone to a successful future, which for the participants meant having a prosperous career and the ability to be financially stable. The participants in this study were well-versed in the expectations and rigor of AP classes, which most shared they learned through family, friends, and teachers. Although family had a significant effect on the participants' contention that they would undoubtedly attend college, not all the participants' parents attended college themselves. Of the fifteen parents that were involved in the participants' lives, two parents completed their master's degrees, five graduated with an undergraduate degree, and eight did not earn a college diploma. Although a family may promote a



college culture at home, it may not be necessary for a parent to have a college degree to influence their children's eventual enrollment in college.

**Teachers.** One of the most significant findings was the influence of teachers on AP enrollment and success. There is a disparity between quality teachers for different ethnicities and “African American students are four times more likely than white students to attend a school where 80 percent or fewer teachers are certified (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b). Research has shown the experience and expertise of teachers also have significant effects on college completion (Clotfelter et al., 2005, Howell, 2011). For the participants, effective teachers, described as caring, experienced, and knowledgeable, were key in enrolling in AP English courses, finding success in the course and on the exams, and later impacted academic practices in college.

Although several of the participants enrolled in AP English due to the natural progression of student tracking in the high school they attended, the participants who rose above natural tracking did so with the encouragement or recommendation from a tenth grade English teacher. Most of the participants were tracked into a ninth and tenth grade G.T. English class. Therefore, if they were successful (as determined by their teacher), they would automatically be enrolled in an AP course in grade eleven. However, for the participants who took honors ninth and tenth grade English, they would either have to be encouraged by their English teacher to move up to an AP English course in eleventh grade or self/parent-advocate with his tenth grade English teacher to be tracked into AP English.

Additionally, although this was a small-scale study, the participants did not report that they felt an overriding impact of racism or prejudice in their secondary educational

experiences. The participants were aware of race and racial divides in the building, such as in the lunch room and in AP classes. The participants were also aware of gender discrepancies, such as noticing the few number of male students and a disproportionate number of female students in AP English classes. However, most students voiced a positive experience in their high school, where they felt accepted and valued by teachers, especially.

**Self-motivation.** The participants all had high expectations and personal standards, which impacted their self-motivation. During the coding process, it was clear that this was the most distinguishable characteristic all the participants shared in their stories of success in AP English. The participants were strongly self-motivated to be successful and claimed to rarely rely on others as support of their success. However, during the data analysis, participants did reveal they often *did* rely on others—friends to discuss class activities and parents and other family members to discuss literature and review written assignments. The participants were motivated to have successful lives, and saw college enrollment and completion as the predictor of later success. Since AP courses were determined by the participants to have a high level of influence on college acceptance, participants took AP courses as part of their “educational game.”

**Academically motivated peers in classes.** For the participants, supportive peers who engaged in academic discourse were influential in enrollment and success in AP English. The participants found that the competitive classmates who were fixated on college acceptance influenced their perception of the “college game.” Since this is a small-scale study, it is not clear if this is a phenomenon that happened within the culture of this particular school building or community, or if it exists outside of the participants’

particular secondary school experience. Participants did share that they learned about effectual “marketing” and “packaging” of themselves to potential colleges from students with similar future goals in their AP and G.T. classes, which also likely influenced the participants to enroll in AP English courses.

While most of the participants referenced being one of the few African American students in AP English class, acknowledged that their inner-circle of friends were not in AP, and admitted not discussing AP courses with close friends who were not in AP, all the participants suggested that this was not a significant factor when considering taking AP English. Some research (Henfield, 2012; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008; Ford, 2011, Matthews, 2006) suggests that social isolation and the heightened awareness of social injustice influences African American students’ decreased participation in AP classes. Most of the participants discussed that their self-motivation, positive teacher relationships, parental encouragement, and a sense of humor superseded possible deterrents to enrolling in AP English.

**Educational opportunities.** For the participants, AP English was a course that the participants saw as a way to equip themselves with the linguistic competencies they would need to be successful. The participants did not necessarily see the value of studying literature; however, all the participants discussed writing as an important skill they developed that benefited them later in college. Additionally, although the participants reported increased writing skills as the most significant benefit, most participants suggested that their reading stamina developed during AP English and that their increased stamina augmented their college readiness in several different content areas that required in-depth reading. Furthermore, the participants all determined that

communication skills were an important skill that was developed in the AP English classroom. Increased communication skills differed among the participants—for some it was speaking and language skills, and for others, it was presentation skills.

The participants also infrequently identified the absence of a culturally relevant curriculum as a limitation to success. Surprisingly, most of the participants reported that their favorite novels or their favorite novels of study are considered “classics,” and written by “dead, white guys.” Favorites of the participants included *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Of Mice and Men*. Damien’s favorite novel was also a classic and written by a white author—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain; however, for him, the content of the novel and exploration of race was given as the rationale for the book being a “favorite.” One point of interest is that the books touted as favorites are stories written by men and are about men. The content and themes of these novels could be a relevant factor to the participants in this study. The themes are universal—Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* feels isolated and struggles with growing up. Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* struggle with class and wealth, dissatisfaction, love, and deceit. Plus, there are some enthralling party and car scenes. George Milton in *Of Mice and Men* dreams of living independently on his own land, but a friendship that is not necessarily reciprocal holds him back from achieving his dreams. More research in literature that students who are African American male find stimulating and relevant is necessary.

The participants also infrequently noted that linguistic issues influenced their success in AP English. Although most of the participants are well-versed in SAE, as evident in their responses during the interview process, all the participants also used

slang. For example, the word “ghetto” was used by several of the participants to indicate something undesirable. Other words that were frequently used were “chill,” “chillin’,” “lit,” “fam,” “peoples,” “peeps,” “bros,” “extra,” “goals,” “basic,” and “salty.” It is unclear if these words are typical of AAL, or if they are just considered youth slang. More research is needed on students who are African American and male and the use of SAE in the AP English classroom.

The findings from this study offer important implications for teachers, administrators, policy makers, and educational researchers. There is much to learn from the stories of success of African American men.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this research study. Because this was a qualitative, exploratory study, the number of participants was small and the demographics were narrow. The participants all attended public schools in the same affluent community. Seven of the eight participants attended the same high school and all the participants had the researcher as an AP English teacher. The customs and particular culture of the community where these participants were raised could have greatly influenced their personal values, motivations, and successes. Several of the participants shared they believed the community, staff, and students at the high school they attended had progressive understandings of not only ethnicity and culture, but the importance of attending a college or university. Lonnie shared, “I know I was lucky to go to a good high school. There wasn’t a lot of racism. Well, I didn’t feel there was. And, the expectation to go to college was always there.” Comparably, this may not be a typical community to be raised in as for other children who are male and African

American. This study was not meant to be generalizable. However, there are few studies that explore the experience of students who are African American and male in AP English courses and the perceived effects on later academics. Seemingly, a large-scale study could provide rich data, especially if participants did not necessarily attend high school in an affluent community or have the researcher as an AP English teacher.

Interestingly, most research (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Klugman, 2013; Lubienski, 2002) suggests that socioeconomic factors, not ethnicity, influences who does and does not take AP courses. However, in examining the demographics of the school the participants attended, it is clear that this school is well-funded, has expert teachers, and a plethora of AP course offerings. Nonetheless, the enrollment in AP English courses and successful completion of an AP English exam falls along the national averages, thus implying ethnicity has more influence than previous research studies have suggested.

Additionally, in writing the proposal for this research study, I was concerned that the participants' current personal relationships and past teacher/student relationship would offer some difficulty in the participants sharing their stories. What I experienced was pure excitement from participants in wanting to share their stories and member-check their responses and personal data. One participant shared that he was "proud" of me for doing this research. Another participant contended, "I don't even want to be anonymous—I want people to really hear my story." Another participant explained, "To me it doesn't matter if *you* are white or Black, it just matters that you are trying to make better teachers for Black kids." Most participants too, at the end of the interviews, expressed disappointment in the interview ending; one stating, "I could talk about this all

day.” Although the research could have been limited by the personal relationships with these participants, their genuine appreciation for the research study and their excitement to contribute their voices overshadowed any trepidations.

This research study is also limited by its researcher. As an older white female who was their teacher, there is the chance that the participants’ responses were clouded by possible perceptions of power. The participants, at some point in their past, had spent a significant amount of time with me in a classroom, and classroom discussions and studied content may have influenced their perspectives of AP teachers, English class, influences, and race. The interviews were also limited in nature due to time constraints and participant availability. Eight participants provided a significant amount of data. Interviews and the coding process took longer than expected, close to eight months when four to five months was planned. The study may have benefited from either a smaller amount of participants with multiple follow-up interviews or from more participants, who could have provided more data.

This study is also limited by its methodology. Interviews have several factors that contribute to the strength of a study’s findings: they allow for a face-to-face encounter with informants, they provide a large amount of expansive and contextual data quickly, data are collected in a natural setting, they rely on cooperation from participants, they allow for follow-up data collection for clarification and omission, they permit for a wide range of types of data and informants, they are useful for discovering complex interconnections in social relationships, they are good for obtaining data on nonverbal behavior and communication, they allow for facilitation of analysis, validity checks, and triangulation, they help facilitate the discovery of nuances in culture, they provide

flexibility in the formulation of hypotheses, and they are a great utility for uncovering the subjective side, the “native’s perspective” of organizational processes (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 100). Conversely, it is important to be aware of the weaknesses behind interview collection and the case study process. Yin (2014) maintains that there are concerns about case study research, such as rigor, fairness in reporting data, the inability to generalize bias, unmanageable levels of data, and unclear comparable data, and “in case study research, they may occur more frequently and demand greater attention” (p. 22). However, addressing those concerns and recognizing them helped overcome potential issues. Rigor was created through following systematic procedures, evidence was presented fairly, and generalizing was maximized because there was more than one participant. Data were managed in an organized data base and there was not a comparable data issue because this was a study aimed at uncovering insights, not at discovering the effectiveness of an intervention.

Although the participants in the study linked a positive correlation between AP English classes and later success, causality was not established. College and universities who place a significant amount of weight on AP participation and AP exam scores may not consider that enrolling in AP courses and passing AP exams may be more likely due to high ability, motivation, and drive. Educational policy makers need to be weary in placing too much emphasis on the AP program because no real causal impact has been determined. Although troubling to consider, weighing AP so heavily in college enrollment may lead to increased exclusion for students who are African American because high-achieving students who have access to AP courses may try to differentiate themselves in the college admission process and take more AP courses. AP courses are



not necessarily designed to help students succeed in college, instead they merely provide students a way to access college-level material and a way to develop skills for a particular content area.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

To conclude, I offer the following recommendations for practice and research based on the review of the participants' data and from the participants themselves. Results from this study have several implications for policymakers, administrators and teachers. Much educational research on African American youth has been devoted to the deficit model, exploring more of the problems, such as a parent's educational attainment or socioeconomic status. Much is to be learned by studying the stories of success; therefore, policymakers and educational researchers should make a conscious shift to study African American students, especially males, who have excelled in schools versus under-performing students.

**Pre-service teachers.** Sealey-Ruiz and Greene (2015), in their research on pre-service teachers claim that "Black male youth are undergoing what can be deemed as 'educational genocide'—the killing off of any chances for equitable education" (p. 55). In their research, based on many of Ladson-Billings's (2005) findings, they found that students who are African American and male are typically taught by white teachers, who were educated by white college professors, in predominantly white colleges and universities. They contend that many pre-service teachers rely on their understanding of culture by what they see in the media or sometimes even take a color-blind ideology, which are counter productive in shaping future teachers' racial literacy. They call for cultural competence training for all pre-service teachers where they are taught "culturally

responsive pedagogical strategies,” “racial literacy development,” and “space to discuss theories and ways in which the socially constructed, media-driven image of the Black male impacts their views of Black men and youth” (p. 69).

Sealey-Ruiz and Greene (2015) offer several suggestions for pre-service teachers to “end the silence that pervades our conversations about race. Our silence serves only to reinforce our ignorance of the needs of African American students, thereby perpetuating the inequities that lead to poor school achievement and crowded prisons” (p. 71). They recommend that pre-service teachers engage, read, and view texts about race and racism to learn appropriate language to discuss and contest racial stereotypes and examine their own perceptions of race, personal experiences related to race, and personal identity, especially in relation to White Privilege. They recommend that pre-service teachers learn to accept the promotion of racial literacy in not only their collegiate education classes, but also the classrooms they observe, and challenge discriminatory educational practices. They contend that one specific method pre-service teachers need to embrace is not separating students who are African American from their culture, which can be accomplished by bringing in African American cultural element to the curricula, by valuing what students bring to the classroom, and by becoming a part of the community.

Ladson-Billings (2000) has also studied improving the education and field work pre-service teachers receive before they begin teaching. She also advocates for a comprehensive program for pre-service teachers, and argues that a single course or experience is not appropriate for teachers to prepare for engaging diverse learners. Similar to Sealey-Ruiz and Greene (2015), she maintains that pre-service teachers need to reflect on their own culture and understandings of race and spend time in urban schools

and interacting with urban communities. Additionally, when new teachers begin teaching, she contends that teachers maintain high expectations and standards for all students, nurture language nuances of all cultures, and imbed discussions of social inequities in their curriculum. However, for Ladson-Billings, one of the most significant barriers that still needs to be remedied is racism—she maintains “anti-racist educators understand racism is learned behavior and, as such, it can be unlearned” (p. 211).

**Teachers.** Teachers need to be provided with professional staff development in identifying students who are African American who have the potential to do well in AP courses. A tool that teachers can use is the *AP Potential List*, which is designed by the College Board. After students complete the PSAT or SAT, the College Board recommends classes the student might be successful based on his or her responses. If teachers examine these reports, they might be more likely to track students into AP courses if the College Board determines they have potential. Interestingly, none of the participants in this study referenced a guidance counselor or advisor as having any influence in enrolling in AP English courses. This suggests that tracking and particular subject area teachers may have the most influence on AP enrollment. Additionally, students, especially minoritized students, may even be more readily identified from a co-structured approach or joint articulation process where both English teachers and guidance counselors meet to attempt to identify students who may benefit from enrolling in AP English.

Furthermore, the findings from this study suggest that schools should consider experience, content knowledge, and the ability to have strong interpersonal relationships with students when determining which faculty will teach AP courses. The participants in

this study frequently acknowledged the importance of teachers in their enrollment and success; therefore, careful consideration of not only AP English teachers, but also pre-AP (such as G.T. tenth grade English) need to be made when assigning teacher schedules.

AP English teachers need to make conscious decisions about the content that they teach when choice is available. From this small-scale study, male students tend to favor literature written by men and about men. If most AP English teachers are female, they must consider their audience when choosing novels to study. More research is needed in the study of literature, male protagonists, and the connection male students make to literature they read in school.

AP English teachers also need to make considerable efforts in forming positive relationships with all their students and encouraging students to succeed in AP English teachers. These teachers need to go the extra mile in providing extra help, giving students feedback, and providing instruction that prepares them for the rigors of the AP English exam. AP English teachers need to thoroughly know their content, know the skills that are assessed on the AP exam, participate in AP English teacher development, collaborate with other AP English teachers, and provide multiple opportunities for speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Besides forming positive relationships with all students, teachers also need to consider that male students may not engage in help-seeking behavior in the same way as their female counterparts. Findings from this study suggest that these male students were strongly impacted by females in their lives; however, most of these females seemed to take on “mothering” roles, which were not necessarily initiated by the participants. The participants also frequently referenced that their self-motivation was what lead to their success. Although this undoubtedly had a

factor, students who are African American and male may benefit from frequent check-ins initiated by the teacher because they may not ask for help when they need it.

English departments within a school building could also benefit from vertical teaming. An AP English vertical team would include a group of English teachers (and can include middle school teachers) who work together to align curriculum and scaffold skills necessary for students to be successful in later AP courses. Pre-AP teachers would also benefit from AP training and professional development to gain a better understanding of the rigor of AP classes and the skills necessary to be successful. A comprehensive AP English vertical team could ensure that AP English is not taught in isolation, and that teaching skills and concepts for later success could be taught over several successive school years. A College Board (2002) study on specifically AP English vertical teams, found that there was a “slight improvement” of rigor in pre-AP courses, there was an increase in “access to students taking AP courses,” and there was a “slight increase” in students who are African Americans engaged in pre-AP classes (p. 6).

**Administrators.** Administrators need to carefully assess who teaches AP English. The participants for this study often referenced the “tough love” approach used by their AP English teachers that they determined was influential on their success. This was often described as a teacher who demonstrated care and compassion, but also was well-versed in content. The participants also referenced that their teachers had high expectations and provided a challenging, engaging classroom environment. Administrators should consider the experience, expertise, cultural awareness, and effectiveness of AP English teachers when creating teacher schedules.

Administrators should consider the positive impact of collaboration on increasing the effectiveness of teaching. Numerous research studies have shown the positive impact on teacher collaboration, vertical teaming, and AP teacher development on both a micro and macro level (Hallam, Smith, Hite, Wilcox, 2015; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueesn, Grissom, 2015; Zinth, 2016) on instruction, student engagement, and test scores.

Administrators need to provide AP teachers with collaborative planning time, vertical planning time, and quality professional development in the content area they teach.

Administrators need to ensure that outdated modes of assigning teachers to teach an AP English course are eliminated, such as assigning all AP courses to the department chair or the teachers who have had the most experience. Although in many cases these teachers may in fact be the best teachers for these courses, others should not be eliminated based on leadership roles or years teaching. Also, in some schools, there may only be one or possibly two AP English teachers. These teachers need to be provided with opportunities to engage in professional communities outside their building—AP English teachers should not live in a bubble.

Additionally, administrators should provide plenty of opportunities in the school schedule for students to enroll in an AP English course. If the option for students is not there, then it is obvious that students will not be able to take the course. Administrators should consider how many students request to be placed in an AP English class before they determine how many sections to offer. This can ensure demand for AP courses is met. Administrators should also consider fostering an open enrollment policy for AP course offerings. Open enrollment for AP courses is when students can choose to take AP courses themselves, and do not need to be tracked into a class or referred by a teacher.

In Roegman and Hatch's (2016) study on open enrollment in four different school districts in New Jersey, they found "The AP lever for boosting access, success, and equity" was open enrollment. They studied "four New Jersey districts with different demographics" and found that all four districts "substantially increased the number of students taking AP exams without significantly decreasing the average student scores" (p. 20). Roegman and Hatch offer several changes and strategies for increasing access to AP courses for all students. First, structural changes include opening more sections of courses and offering more courses, developing programs for first-time AP students, or possibly eliminating tracking or honors level classes. Educational strategies would include training for teachers, educating parents on the benefits of AP, and educating guidance counselors on identifying students who may meet with success in an AP classroom. Some changes to policy could include requiring all students to take one AP course and/or AP exam in order to graduate from high school. Although there are concerns about open enrollment, such as teachers needing to water down content or slowing down pacing, emerging research has shown that open enrollment programs not only address issues of equity, but also continue to provide rigor and college preparedness for all high school students.

Besides open enrollment, some school districts have increased AP exam participation when they have paid for the exam for students. For example, in a study of incentives by the College Board, Jeong (2009) found that after analyzing nationally representative AP exam data that "AP exam fee exemption, the most prevalent incentive, leads to an increase in the likelihood of AP course enrollees taking the exam—

in particular, the disadvantaged” (p. 346). Therefore, administrators should consider using school, district, or state funding to alleviate exam costs for students.

Administrators also need to ensure they are providing a diverse, yet inclusive school culture. Although the school the participants attended was reported to be “progressive” and the participants reported few incidents of perceived racism, the school still has students who are African American and male marginalized from AP English classes. Research (LaCour, York, Welner, Valladares, & Kelley, 2017) does demonstrate that schools who are closing the educational opportunity gaps “work to create a school climate that supports the academic, social, and emotional development of all students” and that “every young person ought to have the opportunity to study in a place that feels safe and supportive and where conflicts are handled in productive ways” (p. 10). School culture could also impact the possible feelings of minoritization, the fear of being labeled “White,” “uncool,” or “feminine” and the contention that AP classes are for “nerds.” Promoting a positive school culture that embraces AP and educating students on the potential benefits of taking AP courses may encourage more students who are African American and male to enroll.

Administrators, in conjunction with AP English teachers and guidance counselors, can collaboratively provide opportunities to support AP students. Summer AP boot camps could be designed and implemented for students to attend before the start of the school year. Boot camp topics can include study tips, test preparation, content backgrounds, reading and writing skills, etc. Administrators can build in study halls for students to work on outside assignments. Simply, scheduled time in the day to study may encourage students to enroll in an AP class. School space that is underutilized can be



turned into AP centers, where students enrolled in AP classes could have a quiet retreat to study, have access to technology and printing, and even be provided snacks. Peer and teacher tutoring may also help students who may be struggling or need enrichment, or administrators can provide access to writing centers not only before and after school, but during the school day as well. Technology support for students has also been growing in recent years. Administrators can purchase online practice and support communities, such as Albert.io, which is a practice and assessment resource for both teachers and students. Administrators can also provide twenty-four hours/seven days support through online chats, provided by AP content area professionals.

Furthermore, administrators and guidance counselors could recruit successful college students who have recently graduated to return and present panel discussions on how AP has influenced their lives, both in and outside the classroom. Students benefit from hearing the voices of peers their own age because they may be find them relatable. Guidance counselors could also provide emotional support by running seminars on time management and calming/anxiety-reducing techniques. The mental health and anxiety producing effects of rigorous courses has not been fully researched.

Another area of decreasing marginalization may be in creating an academic academy, which is a program that is crafted within a high school. Academies, where students are grouped together with other students who have similar interests and who are strongly self-motivated might also be a strategy to encourage AP enrollment and success. In Swanson and Nagy's (2014) study of a first year AP academy for students who are African American, the researchers found that the participants reported being supported academically, socially, and emotively in an AP academy. The study also found that the

smaller community within the larger high school community built student belonging and that teachers utilized culturally responsive and differentiated instruction. They also found that the students' involvement in the AP academy built motivation and encouraged hard work. Consequently, although creating academies within a school building requires effort and strong leadership, the benefits for students and the possibility of decreasing marginalization could be significant.

Administrators should also consider funding for students who have AP potential. Students could be given incentives, such as a Google Chromebook or Kindle, to encourage AP enrollment. Teachers, especially AP teachers, could be provided extra incentives, such as limiting non-teaching duties, giving extra planning time, and paying teachers for extra time they devote in helping students be successful. Funding can also be used to provide students with transportation if they need to stay after school for enrichment. Saturday school augmented instruction could also increase enrollment.

Lastly, administrators should consider having a designated AP coordinator to ensure a successful AP program implementation. Having one person dedicated to creating a successful program and encouraging student enrollment could be beneficial in bridging the achievement gap in AP. Flores and Gomez (2011), in their study of a school's strategies for increasing AP participation for underrepresented students, found that the school benefited from an AP coordinator. Their research suggests having someone who is fully devoted to the organization and success of an AP program at a school increases enrollment and positively impacts exam scores. They suggest that "the AP program also requires the time and dedication of a coordinator and one or more

administrators closely working with and supporting the coordinator” and that he or she “is meticulous with data and proactive” (p. 74).

Parents, teachers, school officials, and policy makers need to make concerted efforts to increase the number of African American students in G.T. and AP classes and to make sure these students are aware of the benefits of rigorous coursework and the likelihood it has on college acceptance and college completion. Secondary school teachers need to be aware of the tracking recommendations for African American students and how it can influence possible enrollment in future AP courses. In increasing student enrollment in AP English classes, it is crucial that schools scrutinize the ways they are recruiting African American students for AP courses. Are all students getting the message? This needs to happen in a more “in-house” manner than from a district or county-wide initiative. Even within specific school districts, schools can have significant disproportionalities. Therefore, it is imperative for administrators to look at recruitment within the school building itself.

**Parents and students.** Parental involvement is paramount in enhancing the community-natured aspect of encouraging students to take rigorous courses and prepare for college. School officials must reach out to families and invite them into the school building, educate both parents and students about the benefits of AP, maintain an open dialogue, and encourage partnerships between schools and families. This can be accomplished through emails, social posts, letters home, newsletters (mailed and emailed), phone calls home, open houses, information afternoons/nights, information fairs, round table discussions, AP potential meetings, and student/teacher panels.

Establishing trust with families could cultivate relationship that will help students enroll in AP classes. Administrators should open the school building. Encourage parents to attend classes with their children. Administrators and teachers should go out into the actual community where they teach. They should visit church groups, community centers, libraries to set up information sessions outside the school building and involve community leaders.

Students also need to be well-informed of the benefits of taking AP courses. The participants in this particular study were knowledgeable about the rigor of AP and the advantages of taking AP courses; however, for most students, this is probably not the case. From early in their secondary educational experience, students need to be made aware of the AP program, how “to get” there, and the benefits of taking AP courses. They need to hear it from teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators. Students need to be actively recruited and engage in one-on-one conversations with a multitude of adults on the benefits of taking AP courses.

For the most part, families are particularly influential on students. Therefore, as we aim to decrease the achievement gap, schools must work with families. Educating, updating, and informing families about the existence, importance, and benefits of AP classes and exams is paramount. If families have information and support from schools, then they have the power to help their children be successful.

**Policy makers.** Educational districts and states need to consider and study the benefits of AP English classes on students and how they impact later collegiate success. One of the most influential barriers for students enrolling in AP English is that schools serving predominantly students who are African American and Latino/a offer

significantly fewer AP courses than schools serving white students (Zarate & Pachon, 2006). Policy makers need to employ necessary means to make sure access to AP courses is equitable for all students. If policy makers have a vested interest in seeing more students graduate from college, schools need to make an investment in attempting to increasing AP exam pass rates. Researchers Dougherty, Mellor, and Jian (2006) found the percent of a school's students who pass AP exams to be significantly associated with the percent of students who graduate from college. Additionally, researchers Morgan and Klaric (2007) in their study on how passing AP exams in high school impacted college success found that students who do pass AP exams perform significantly better in college than non-AP students. Scott, Tolson, and Lee (2010) in their study on AP students and college achievement grades found that when controlling for SAT scores and class rank, students who took AP classes earned better grades in college. Policy makers need to develop and support policies that close the gaps to AP access by increasing AP offerings, especially at schools with significant number of students from marginalized backgrounds. Policy makers need to provide financial support for AP exams and fund teacher training.

No one strategy is going to close the achievement gap for students who are African American and male; therefore, depending on a school's particular students' needs, a variety of practices would probably work together to ensure success in AP.

**Future Research.** For future research, there are several areas of interest that may contribute to the decrease in marginalization of students who are African American and male in AP English. A study of the experiences of African American students in AP English classes could be studied with a larger population, in different areas of the U.S., and in varying degrees of socioeconomic status. Additionally, an expanded study could

be conducted on students who also face disproportionate numbers in AP courses, such as Latinos/as or Native Americans. This study could also be conducted within the AP context of other disciplines, such as the humanities, math, art, or science.

Inside the AP English classroom, a study of how African American students navigate the classroom in terms of SAE may offer potential insights into how language plays a part in AP English enrollment and AP English success. As described by the participants, some determined that language may have more to do with socioeconomics and education than ethnicity. How language continues to affect students who are African American and male could offer particularly interesting insights.

Some schools, although not many, are experiencing success in decreasing marginalization. A study of how a specific school or school district increased enrollment in AP students who are African American, or other ethnic or gender groups, could benefit other schools and the students who attend those schools in increasing AP enrollment and success.

The participants in this study were also all intrinsically self-motivated. A study of how students who are African American and male demonstrate self-motivation in AP classes is needed. In particular, a study that focuses in more depth than this current study on the influences and experiences may provide particular insights on how to help all students increase their self-motivation.

Interestingly, the participants in this study all suggested that women were particularly influential on their success and self-motivation. A study of how women, particularly mothers, mother figures, or female teachers influence students who are African American

and male could also provide understanding in relation to motivation and academic success.

Another area that could be of interest is to study students who have also achieved success in the AP English classroom, but attended a school that they determined was not as culturally responsive as AP High. The participants in this study claimed AP High was a school that had a culture that promoted equity, diversity, and acceptance. A study situated in a school where students did not feel the school was culturally responsive might provide interesting data points in terms of race, culture, and/or ethnicity.

### **Closing Remarks**

African American students strive for success just like their white peers. The findings of this study highlight the successes that students who are African American and male had in AP English courses and how those successes positively impacted their later academic careers. Unfortunately, there is abundant data that accounts for the underrepresentation of students who are African American and male in AP programs in U.S. public schools. There is little data that originates from high achieving students themselves and few studies that give voice to these students who found success in an AP English classroom. This study aimed to contribute to that gap in the research. Findings from the cross-analysis of eight individual case studies provided and revealed significant factors and influences on AP English enrollment and success. The most significant factors point to the expectations by those around them to attend college, the prestige an AP English class offers in the college enrollment process, self-motivation, teacher effectiveness, and support by people close to them.

**Appendix A: Interview**

1. Confirm the participant's name, age, ethnicity/race, high school graduation year, score on the AP English exam(s), college(s) attended, college area of study, college graduation date, and current title.
2. Growing up, how would you describe your home life and family? Who did you live with? [economic obstacles, family structure\*]
3. Would you describe your upbringing as "middle class"? [economic obstacles]
4. What were your early experiences in reading and writing? Do you remember learning to read? What books do you remember reading when you were young? Did you write for pleasure or keep a journal? [parental influence, positive role models, reading practices at home]
5. When you were growing up, did people around you read? Who were they and what did they read? [reading practices at home]
6. How did you occupy your time when you were younger?
7. What were you like in elementary / middle school?
8. How would you describe your home life or your family on impacting how you did in school? [parental involvement, gender differences]
9. How would you describe your path (or track) to taking higher level English classes?
10. Do you think you were successful in English classes and AP English?
11. Why do you think you did well in English classes?
12. Was there something specific you remember that you did to ensure your success?
13. Did you have any scheduling problems related to taking AP courses? [scheduling]
14. Who helped you be successful in English class? [family and role models]
15. What did your friends think of you taking AP English? [being cool, "Acting White"]
16. Did you have any friends who helped you meet with success in AP English?



17. Did you have people in your life that were not supportive of you taking AP English? [“Acting White,” being cool, positive role models]
18. What is your opinion of AP English classes in general?
19. What did you actually do in order to be successful in AP English classes?
20. If I sat next to you in class, what would I have observed?
21. How did you prepare for the exam?
22. What influenced you when you were taking the course to “stay on the right track”?
23. Did you experience any set backs or road blocks?
24. How did you react?
25. What role do you think AP English has in your life? [AP as a mark of distinction]
26. What role do you think AP English played in your college enrollment or experience?
27. What was the effect/result of passing an AP English exam?
28. How would you explain your experiences in AP English classes to a friend who did not take AP English courses?
29. What is your opinion of the AP English curriculum or the books that you read in AP English? [culturally relevant curriculum]
30. What is your opinion of the writing that you did in AP English?
31. What is your opinion of English teachers or AP English teachers? [effectual teachers]
32. What would make a good AP English teacher?
33. What is your opinion on teachers who do not share the same ethnicity or culture you have? [ethnicity/culture]
34. Do you think your ethnicity or gender had any impact on your success in an AP English class? Why or why not? [involuntary minority, resisting dominant culture, feelings of minoritization, masculinity]
35. Do you think what you see on television or other media influences taking an AP English course or how successful you were? Explain [stereotypes and media]

36. Do you think you change your speech for different situations? If yes, why? If yes, do you think the AP English classroom has any influence on your communication or presentation skills? [voice, code switching]
37. What did you learn about communicating in AP English class?
38. What do you think about standardized testing, especially AP tests? Do they offer any value? [standardized testing]
39. What do you think about today's classroom experience? Do you think the way an AP English curriculum is presented to students needs to change? How would you teach the class if you could? [students' perceptions/culturally relevant curriculum]
40. Do you think that there are educational policies, such class sizes, tracking, graduation requirements or "things going on in the outside the classroom" that helped or hurt your success?
41. Are there things on the news, especially in relation to young, African American males that influenced your success? [contemporary issues]
42. Did social media—such as Instagram or SnapChat influence your success?
43. How do you think being in an AP English class affect your life after high school?
44. Do you currently read for pleasure?
45. What type of reading do you do now? Did AP English influence how you read?
46. What type of writing do you have to do now? Did AP English influence that?
47. Did AP English have any impact on how you communicate? Speak? Listen?
48. Did AP English have an impact on how you handle presentations?
49. Can you share your artifact with me?

[...\*] indicate how the question coordinates with the literature review

### **Appendix B: Artifact Directive**

Thank you for your participation in today's interview. It means a lot to me that you are willing to give up your time and share experiences with me in this way. For our final interview, I am requesting that you bring some sort of artifact that you relate to your experiences in an AP English class. It can be anything you want, and I don't necessarily need to keep it, but would like to. It could be a song, poem, digital creation, photograph, free-write, painting, sculpture, video, jewelry item, etc. Please don't limit yourself to this list—bring whatever you think is appropriate. Think of it as you artistically creating a memory of the experience of meeting with success in an AP English class.

**Appendix C: Consent Form**



**Institutional Review Board**

1204 Marie Mount Hall • 7814 Regents Drive • College Park, MD 20742 • 301-405-4212 • [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu)

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

<p><b>Project Title</b></p>	<p><i>Investigating the Stories of Success for Students who are African American and Male in AP English</i></p>
<p><b>Purpose of the Study</b></p>	<p><i>This research is being conducted by <b>Erin McArdle</b>, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Turner at the University of Maryland, College Park.</i></p> <p><i>We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a former high school student who successfully completed an AP English class with a course average of 79.5% or higher. Additionally, you earned a “3” or higher out of “5” on an AP English exam (either AP Language and Composition or AP Literature and Composition).</i></p> <p><i>The purpose of this research project is to gain insight into what led to your success. There are few research studies that study success for students who are African American and male from a non-deficit orientation. Research continues to suggest that students who are African American and male continue to be under-represented in GT/AP courses, and that AP passing rates continue to be stagnant. Therefore, this study is significant because students who are African American and male continue to be unacceptably underserved by U.S. public education. The purpose of this research is attempt to determine solutions to the problem of underrepresentation.</i></p>

<p><b>Procedures</b></p>	<p><i>The procedures involve meeting with the researcher, Erin McArdle, to participate in three interviews. Interviews will take place from February through June of 2018. Interviews will be spanned approximately one week apart. You will agree to meet in a mutually agreeable, public place. Each interview will involve a set of semi-structured interview questions. For example, “What did you actually do in order to be successful in AP English classes?” Each interview will last approximately an hour. Each interview will be audio recorded through an I-Phone X and transcribed. You will also be asked to provide a self-chosen artifact that represents your experiences in AP English that you will share with the researcher. The artifact does not need to be given to the researcher; however, the researcher will ask to photograph the artifact. You can choose not to have the artifact photographed. Data will be destroyed after the research study is completed. Additionally, to create a higher-level of sincerity, I plan on writing bi-weekly (or more if needed) journal-type reflections on my role as a researcher. Research has proposed that reflexivity and journaling can combat ethical issues for researchers because they can document experiences, feelings, emotions, opinions, and thoughts during the research process. I will type these and keep them in a separate database for easy referral, and review my responses periodically to keep my lens “in check.”</i></p>
<p><b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b></p>	<p><i>There may be some risks from participating in this research study.</i></p> <p><i>Some of the risks could include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>-a loss of time, you should expect to spend three to five hours in the interview process and deciding upon an artifact</i></li> <li><i>-to mitigate loss of time, you should be aware that the researcher can be flexible during the interview process, such as changing a scheduled meeting time or meeting in a place that is convenient for you, such as near your residence, school, or place of work</i></li> </ul> <p><i>Although unlikely, you may experience fear, embarrassment or fatigue by:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>-recalling uncomfortable moments in school or in relation to high-stakes academic testing</i></li> <li><i>-describing the hassles of living in poverty</i></li> <li><i>-describing uncomfortable family dynamics</i></li> </ul> <p><i>To mitigate these effects, you can choose not to answer an</i></p>

	<i>interview question, stop an interview at any time, or withdraw from this study at any time.</i>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<i>There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about how students who are African American and male can be successful in AP English courses and on AP exams. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of your perception of success.</i>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<p><i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing transcripts in a locked and password secure database on a password-protected computer. Data will be coded for confidentiality. Your name will not be included on any collected data or transcriptions. A code will be placed on all collected data, and through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your data to your identity. Only the researcher will have access to the identification key.</i></p> <p><i>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></p>
<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. Your participation or non-participation will not negatively nor positively affect your relationship with the researcher and if you wish to withdraw from the study no further contact will be made regarding the study.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>Erin McArdle</b></p>

	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>or contact the researcher's advisor:</b>  <b>Dr. Jennifer Turner</b>  <b>University of Maryland, College Park</b>  <b>Benjamin Building</b>  <b>College Park, Maryland</b>  <a href="mailto:jdturner@umd.edu">jdturner@umd.edu</a>  <b>301.405.0433</b></p>	
<p><b>Participant Rights</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park                  Institutional Review Board Office                  1204 Marie Mount Hall                  College Park, Maryland, 20742                  E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a>                  Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>	
<p><b>Statement of Consent</b></p>	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i></p>	
<p><b>Signature and Date</b></p>	<p><b>NAME OF PARTICIPANT</b></p>	
<p><b>Signature and Date</b></p>	<p><b>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</b></p>	
<p><b>Signature and Date</b></p>	<p><b>DATE</b></p>	

## **Appendix D: Initial and Continuance of IRB Approval**

### **Initial Approval:**

U of MD

Please note that University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [1149329-1] Investigating the Stories of Success for Students who are African American and Male in AP English  
Principal Investigator: Erin McArdle, PhD

Submission Type: New Project  
Date Submitted: December 18, 2017

Action: APPROVED  
Effective Date: January 19, 2018  
Review Type: Expedited Review

Should you have any questions you may contact Linette Berry at [lberry2@umd.edu](mailto:lberry2@umd.edu).

Thank you,  
The IRBNet Support Team

### **Continuance of Approval:**



U of MD

Please note that University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has published the following Board Document on IRBNet:

Project Title: [1149329-2] Investigating the Stories of Success for Students who are African American and Male in AP English  
Principal Investigator: Erin McArdle, PhD

Submission Type: Continuing Review/Progress Report  
Date Submitted: January 3, 2019

Document Type: Approval Letter  
Document Description: Approval Letter  
Publish Date: January 7, 2019

The IRB Determination Letter can be accessed by clicking Reviews under the Project Administration menu in your IRBNet project.

Should you have any questions you may contact the UMD IRB at [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu).

Thank you,  
The IRBNet Support Team

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