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In my thesis, The “Others”: Counter-Stories of Black Girls’ Achievement, change of a site name to the correct name.

Page 53: Under Kara's name change the location to Lakeland Spring.

It should read: "Our great course selection book and guide to Lakeland Spring..."

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The “Others”: Counter-Stories of Black Girls’ Achievement

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The “Others”: Counter-Stories of Black Girls’ Achievement

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This qualitative study analyzes the experiences of Black girls in advanced placement (AP) classes in a southwestern Pennsylvania public school in order to understand the ways in which they gain access to AP classes. The central substantive question guiding this study is: How do teachers, counselors and school administrators influence the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced placement courses. This study utilizes qualitative methods to look specifically at the intersectional identities of Black girls to contribute to the limited body of literature on Black girls in honors and advanced placement courses. The three mechanisms through which inequality is perpetuated are microaggressions and stereotyping, teachers’ colorblind attitudes, and the lack of a clear process and policy in which information about access is distributed. By using Black feminist theory, intersectionality and Critical Race Theory (CRT), this research works to identify gaps in sociology and education literature regarding the experiences and counter-stories of marginalized groups. Applying the gendered and racialized oppression matrix to the experiences of Black girls in academic settings will enhance further exploration of academic resiliency by marginalized persons.

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1.0 Introduction

Upon entering public schools across the United States, students start kindergarten on what seems to be a level playing field. As these students transition into subsequent grade levels, individual students gain access to increased opportunities associated with academic or educational achievement, while others stay in regular track classes or fall behind completely. Unfortunately, much disparity between those gaining access to advanced level classes and gifted programs is racialized. Black and Latinx students are the least likely to have access to these opportunities, while White and Asian students continue to make up the majority of those in these advanced level classes and programs (Howell & Caisey, 2019). The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which Black girls specifically are tracked into honors and AP classes through the use of interviews with those relevant to this process. Black students are underrepresented in AP classes and the information that students receive about advanced courses and academic opportunities is not being presented equitably. The disparities that exist between those students who have access to AP classes and those who do not lead to differential outcomes in students access to a higher quality of teachers and curriculum (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This case study takes place at a high school with 1,600 students in southwestern Pennsylvania over 8 months. The total enrollment of Black/African American students at the school is 68 percent, while the rest of the students enrolled are white, yet white students make up the majority of students taking AP classes. The current study utilizes the counter-stories of Black girls in order to give them agency, and to show how the ways in which they view accessibility and AP classes differs from those who are in a position to provide them with information on academic opportunities such as teachers, guidance counselors, and school administrators.

What We Know?

The literature on Black girls' achievement and resiliency identifies the following as hindrances to Black girls' access to AP classes: stereotypes and implicit biases that teachers and school administrators have toward Black girls, the racialized treatment and discipline of Black girls within the classroom, teachers negative perceptions of Black girls, and early racialized tracking of certain students into advanced level classes and programs (Campbell, 2012; Evans-Winters, 2011; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017; Tyson, 2003). Black girls fall victim to the harmful perceptions of others and this can negatively impact their self-image. Educators and administrators can carry implicit biases with them in their interactions with students (NWLC, 2014; Venzant Chambers et al., 2009). Some of these stereotypes include ideas that Black women are "angry", "aggressive", "promiscuous", "hypersexualized", and girls are looked at as if they are adults (Morris, 2007; NWLC, 2014). These negative stereotypes of Black girls limit their educational opportunities.

What We Don't Know?

What is missing from the literature is an examination of educational achievement that focuses in on the racialized and gendered experiences of Black girls as they resist color-blindness and oppression within schools. Color-blindness perpetuated through interactions with the teachers, counselors, and administrators is key to understanding the reasoning for Black girls' resistance. This qualitative study analyzes the experiences of Black girls in AP classes, recognizing the ways in which they remain resilient and balance their identities within these classes. The experiences of Black girls within AP and honors classes cannot be examined without utilizing intersectionality as a framework for analysis. Through the use of an intersectional framework I complete in-depth

interviews and observations which explore Black girls' reasons for choosing to enter honors and AP classes, how they are learning about opportunities to take these classes, and the general understanding of the process of getting into an AP class. Black girls are choosing to take honors and advanced placement courses in order to challenge themselves in preparation for attendance to college. These girls recognize that the classroom environment of AP and honors classes are more conducive to learning. The counter-stories of Black girls show resistance to the status quo as Black girls take the initiative in forming relationships with faculty as they participate in the practice of defining themselves through the self-valuation and self-definition. While the school curriculum caters to the master narrative of what students ought to know, these girls are challenging the information they receive and defining themselves independent of the negative narratives that exist about Black girls. Black feminist theory and intersectionality guide this research on the multiplicative experiences of Black girls in AP classes.

Educational Inequality

The current literature on educational inequality within the United States points to four mechanisms that perpetuate stratification within schools: residential segregation, charter and choice school movements, academic tracking, and racialized treatment and discipline (Chapman & Donnor, 2015; Fiel, 2013; Howell & Caisey, 2019; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Reardon & Owens, 2014; Riel et al., 2018). Within these mechanisms of school stratification this research looks specifically at inequality in academic tracking as it pertains to Black girls. The topic of Black girls in AP classes is important due to the ways in which advanced placement has historically increased the likelihood of attending college, while simultaneously maintaining racialized and gendered outcomes.

U.S. advanced placement (AP) courses were introduced during the 1950s in response to the desire of schools to accommodate students who exhibited advanced academic achievement (Kyburg et al., 2007). The AP program allows students to take an individualized approach to their education and students are able to take specific classes, as opposed to a more holistic approach to studying the humanities and sciences (Kyburg et al., 2007). Advanced placement courses are a mode of preparing for entrance to college. These are college courses at the high school level that allow students to receive college credits after receiving a score of 3 or 4 depending on the subject area out of a score of 5 on a subject specific advanced placement exam. These exams are administered and evaluated by College Board, an external, not-for-profit organization and scores are comparable at the national level. Advanced placement courses aim to increase critical thinking skills and encourage more open discussion than general courses. While the purpose of these advanced courses is to provide select students with material appropriate to their capabilities and achievement level, advanced placement classrooms are not representative proportionally of the racial demographics within schools. Access to AP classes is racialized and gendered. Only 4 percent of Black female high school students are enrolled in AP and IB classes nationally, compared to 7 percent of White females and 5 percent of White male students (Howell & Caisey, 2019). Much like AP, IB or the International Baccalaureate program encourages academic achievement, but the IB program is much smaller only being offered in about 830 schools while AP is offered in close to 14,000 schools (Pannoni, 2014). IB is an international educational foundation headquartered in Switzerland that is offered to children ages 3 to 19, working with schools, governments and international organizations to provide students with a rigorous international education that utilizes a holistic approach. Of those who enroll and take the AP test

for college credit, Black girls have a passing rate of only 26 percent, compared to 67 percent for White boys and 63 percent for White girls (Howell & Caisey, 2019).

Understanding the experiences of Black girls is distinct from Black students overall due to the grouping of Black girls with Black boys, which fails to take the gendered differences of these experiences into account. The importance of understanding the experiences of Black girls is especially distinct from Black boys and White girls because of the intersecting of Blackness with being female, which leads to a dual fight against racism and sexism (Ford et al., 2018). The educational barriers Black girls face because of their intersectional identities include stereotypes, institutional barriers, unequal discipline practices, and disparate selection into AP classes (Ford et al., 2018; Morris, 2016; Greenberger et al., 2014). While Black boys face inequality within the education system, it is important not to prevent the stories and unique experiences of Black girls from being heard. Unfortunately, the experiences of Black girls in educational settings has been grouped with dominant narratives that tend to centralize the experiences of boys.

Much of the literature on Black girls and education informs audiences through a deficit lens with a large amount of focus on the criminalization of Black girls (Evans-Winters, 2011; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017). While criminalization is of significance, literature and research on achievement is just as necessary in order to give Black girls agency in describing their experiences. Additionally, more scholarship on the achievement of Black girls will inform future advocacy work to stop inequality. Studying honors and advanced placement courses gives access to the perspectives of those students deemed academically superior to students in other courses. Consequentially, these students are unique in the sense that the path they have set up for themselves as college bound gives them access to the resources necessary to achieve as the “best” and “brightest” within their high schools, and later on as college students.

2.0 Theoretical Background and Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT), originally emerging within the legal studies field during the 1970s, is a theoretical tool used to challenge dominant systems of racial oppression (Delgado et al., 2012; Bell, 1995). Although the origins of CRT were rooted in the challenging of a racist legal system, today the theory is used within a variety of fields including sociology and education as a way of challenging racism within institutions. Of the several elements that make up CRT, those I utilize in this research include the intercentricity of race with other forms of subordination (Intersectionality), storytelling (Counter-Stories), centrality of experiential knowledge (Black Feminist Theory), and challenge to the dominant ideology recognizing color-blindness as an act of violence (Museus, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano, 1998; Bonilla-Silva, 2018). CRT recognizes the ways in which race and gender along with other intersectional elements that characterize the experiences of Black girls creates inequality within educational institutions (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Through the use of Black feminist theory and intersectionality, this research applies a gendered and racialized oppression matrix to the experiences of Black girls in academic settings to enhance further exploration of academic resiliency by marginalized persons. Black feminist theory provides a shared standpoint for Black women that allows for resistance against Black women's victimization through a matrix of overlapping oppressions (Collins, 1989). I use Black feminist theory because it encompasses the standpoints of Black women and girls. Within BFT self-definition is important in resistance to the systems of oppression that degrade Black women and place little value on their knowledge (Collins, 1986). Black women's and girl's self-definition and self-valuation enables this resistance against the psychological and internalized states of

oppression resulting from the marginalization of Black women (Collins, 1986). Intersectionality, created and developed by Black feminists, considers the ways in which multiple identities overlap to create differential experiences of oppression (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984). Intersectionality emphasizes the necessity of analyzing multiple inequalities and identities simultaneously, and theoretically I use this framework for understanding the counter-stories of Black girls' experiences in AP classes. The girls I interview discuss their experiences primarily in connection with their race and gender identities, but other facets of their lives intersect with these identities to create unique standpoints for these girls individually.

What the Research Tells Us About How Black Girls Self-define and Challenge Stereotypes?

Regarding Black girls' identities, stereotype threat provides theoretical support for ways in which girls self-define and challenge stereotypes. Stereotype threat is the immediate situational threat that comes with being aware of the myriad of negative stereotypes that exist about one's group. With a realization of these stereotypes comes an awareness of the ways in which one will be judged and treated differently, and following this how one will try not to fulfill these stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threats potential effects include a disruption of performance that undermines academic achievement (Spencer et al., 1999; Spencer et al., 2016). Black girls' identity-making is shaped by the stereotypes they know exist about Black people and Black girls specifically. Black girls are stereotyped as hypersexualized, loud, and aggressive which leads to negative treatment from some educators (Collins, 2004; Fordham, 1993; Grant, 1984; Harrison, 2015). Research shows that Black girls actually have an increased likelihood of having a positive self-concept and performing better in school when they are assertive, yet this quality is misidentified as being aggressive (Harrison, 2015; Morris, 2007). The literature on Black girls' identity-making also shows that Black girls feel that many of the messages they receive about race

are situated within a dichotomous Black-White discourse (Harrison, 2015). Within this discourse are implicit messages about acceptable behavior and curriculum associated with Eurocentric middle-class perspectives on femininity (Collins, 2004; Harrison, 2015). A cultural-deficit perspective is utilized in communicating this belief, associating “goodness” with Whiteness and “badness” with “Blackness” (Harrison, 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Volk & Long, 2005).

Counter-stories, as a tenet of Critical Race Theory, provide space for the experiences and knowledges of people of color (Delgado 1989). These counter-stories give voice to marginalized people who have been silenced as members of an “outgroup” (Delgado 1989) In this research the counter-stories of Black girls are gathered in order to challenge accepted knowledges that may be oppressive to Black girls within the education system. Counter-stories can be used as a means of psychic self-preservation and as a means of lessening subordination of the individual telling the story (Delgado 1989). Stories can only be viewed through the teller and the listener. As the researcher, I am the listener and the girls I interview provide me with their counter-stories to the dominant narratives about the achievement of Black girls.

Color-blindness in the Classroom

Color-blindness is the belief that race is no longer a significant concern within contemporary society and that racial discrimination is a remnant of the past (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Brown et al. 2003). The 21st century has introduced a “new racism” that is seemingly more covert than the Jim Crow racism of the previous century, yet it still manages to institutionally and systemically impact marginalized groups in ways that are detrimental to upward mobility (Bonilla-Silva 2018). This “new racism” that perpetuates color-blindness is “subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial” (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Within the field of education, white privilege is protected and maintained through discriminatory practices shielded behind claims of color-

blindness. Educational inequality is maintained through de facto segregation as students are still physically learning within different schools, even if this trend is not legally implemented. Additionally, educational inequality continues to permeate throughout school districts through practices of tracking, differential assignment to special education, and other informal school practices (Bonilla-Silva 2018). For example, through the practice of tracking educators and administrators can make claims about the selectivity of students into certain classes based on coded language such as the morality, values and work ethic of particular students, but this is usually shrouded behind racialized beliefs and implicit biases. In this way, color-blindness can serve as a method of shifting the blame to the marginalized group. White and Asian students are more likely to be placed into higher level classes than their Black and Latino counterparts, which in turn leads to a decreased chance in receiving a rigorous curriculum that will prepare them for college (Oakes 1992; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Lewis & Diamond 2015).

The central frames of color-blind racism include abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Abstract liberalism is the foundation of the new racial ideology and supports the use of ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to discuss topics related to race (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Abstract liberalism supports equal opportunity to justify their opposition to policies such as those related to affirmative action. Naturalization is a framework in which white people attribute racial phenomena to natural causes, such as assuming that segregation is about “gravitation toward likeness” rather than dislocation and systemic barriers (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Cultural racism is a framework that utilizes stereotyping to make assumptions about specific groups (Blacks, Mexicans, etc.) of people. Minimization is a framework that does not take the impact of racist practices seriously. This framework denies the significance of discrimination in limiting the life

chances of certain groups of people (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Through this study on Black girls in AP and honors classes, the prevalence of color-blindness in limiting the opportunities of Black girls is prominent.

Scholarship on Resistance

There is not one single conceptualization of the concept “resistance” but, it has been utilized in research on social movements, gender, political sociology and various other areas of study across numerous disciplines (Hollander & Einwohner 2004). Within the field of sociology focusing on the analytical importance of the utility of resistance is most useful (Hollander & Einwohner 2004). Acts of resistance can be individual or collective, and may be local or widespread depending on the scale of resistance. Resistance can have a range of goals or directions and may even be identity-based (Hollander & Einwohner 2004). Sociological literature identifies action and opposition as core components of resistance. Within this research I examine the “everyday” acts of resistance that have been identified as giving the powerless agency in ways that tend to be more covert (Scott 1985; Levi 1998).

Sociology of education literature shows a reexamination of resistance within research over the years. Cultural reproduction theorists in education looked to identify the relationship between school classrooms and a capitalist economic order (Abowitz 2000; Bowles & Gintis 1976). These theorists concluded that students were integrated into a capitalist economic order without much consideration for student agency in this relationship (Abowitz 2000; Hargreaves 1982). These beliefs came out of cultural reproduction theory and mistakenly failed to acknowledge the ways in which students actively and passively resisted this capitalist order (Abowitz 2000; McRobbie & Garber 1993; Willis 1977). Literature on Black students and academic achievement shows that students who are educated in predominantly White academic environments find that these contexts

for learning are “racially hostile” (Carter 2008). In response to this hostility, Black students personify a critical race achievement ideology, or they are able to view themselves as achievers within the context of being Black while simultaneously overcoming perceived racism within the school environment (Carter 2008). This review of the literature shows the ways in which this research on the unique experiences of Black girls within AP classes can contribute to definitions of resistance through an intersectional framework considering gender and race. The resistance that Black girls achieving in AP classes exemplify will contribute to a reconceptualization of understandings of resistance within the classroom utilizing the counter-stories of Black girls.

3.0 Literature Review

Historical Overview

Black girls have been marginalized within AP classes since the inception of these advanced level courses. AP classes historically have been racially and economically segregated, but this did not happen in a vacuum (Ford 2010, 2013). In order to better understand the current status of educational inequality, it is necessary to recognize the current education system as a product of systemic racist and White Supremacist ideas. Understanding the history of “giftedness” and ability tracking will help to inform the current status of the education system and how it impacts Black girls and the segregation that exists within schools. Additionally, history presents a narrative of the ways in which Jim Crow racism became the “new racism” that is understood through the theoretical framework of colorblindness.

Beliefs about the genetic dispositions of racial groups led to the development of IQ Testing, “giftedness”, and consequently the system of tracking students that we see today. Tracking in the U.S. started with studies of “giftedness”. Early studies of “giftedness” began in the beginning of the 20th Century as eugenicists and some educators believed in differential intelligence and identified tracking as a means to addressing these perceived differences (Darling-Hammond 2010). This coincided with the immigration of Italians, Poles, Czechs, and other new immigrants to the United States and ideas of the inferiority of these groups. The pioneers in the study of “giftedness” were Lewis Terman and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Terman, who was a psychologist, IQ test developer, and professor at Stanford, claimed in his research that 80% of the immigrants he tested appeared “feeble-minded” and attributed this to race (2010). Terman stated that “Indians, Mexicans, and

negroes... should be segregated by special classes...They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers” (2010).

World War I led to the beginning of an education system dependent on standardized testing and the beginning of a school testing movement. A French psychologist, Alfred Binet, developed intelligence testing as a way to test for learning disabilities. Lewis Terman, a Stanford psychologist, utilized Binet’s work to create the IQ testing used today, the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Tests. These deeply biased tests helped to perpetuate racial segregation within the military. 1917, Terman and a group of researchers helped the U.S. Army to develop group intelligence tests and a scale for measuring these tests. By the following year, researchers developed hundreds of versions of this type of testing to measure achievement in elementary and secondary school subjects. The SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) was developed by psychologist Carl Brigham in the 1920s from the same intelligence tests used in the Army, measuring aptitude rather than mastery of subjects. Concurrently, ideas around eugenics and White superiority helped to fuel the creation of intelligence testing that was inevitably biased against Black Americans. This history is problematic as it pertains to research on the achievement of Black girls in AP classes because the same tests which have been proven to have a bias against students of color are still used today through the SAT, the ACT, and AP exams for individual subject areas (OTA 1992). If the rationale for the creation of these standardized tests and ways of tracking students were rooted in ideas of White Supremacy, the use of the same methods of examining achievement will inevitably perpetuate educational inequality.

School Segregation and Brown v. Board of Education

The history of school segregation as it relates to de jure (in law) and de facto (in practice) segregation, are necessary to understand the various ways in which segregation trickles down into

the classroom. Looking at the segregation that exists at the district level, the school level, and finally the classroom level lead to specific outcomes for Black girls in AP classes today. The impact of segregation within schools creates an environment in which Black students, and Black girls specifically, have a lesser chance of being represented in these AP classes. Concerning the segregation of schools, the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* legally ended “separate but equal” within educational institutions (Reardon and Owens 2014; Howell and Caisey 2019). This meant that schools could no longer be segregated racially, but there was very little actual change directly after this decision. Before this Supreme Court case, Black-White segregation across the South was the status quo and many other places across the country followed this pattern. After the Brown decision was made, many communities in the South responded by creating “freedom of choice” desegregation plans which put the onus on Black families to enroll their children into White schools (Reardon and Owens 2014). This would be something that Black families would obviously be uncomfortable with given White hostility against Black people in this region. Through the *Civil Right Act of 1964*, discrimination in settings of employment, housing, and public accommodations was prohibited. Title IV of the act specifically addressed the desegregation of public schools and it authorizes the U.S. Attorney General to file lawsuits for enforcement of the Act (Celada & Library of Congress 1967). By 1968, 81% of Black students in the South and 72% of Black students in the border states still attended segregated schools (Clotfelter 2004). In response to this lack of change the 1968 Supreme Court Case *Green v. County Schoolboard of New Kent County*, made it mandatory for all school districts to adopt more effective plans for desegregating schools (Reardon and Owens 2014; Howell and Caisey 2019). Throughout the 1970s court-ordered desegregation plans were introduced to school districts and school segregation finally started to decline (Reardon and Owens 2014; Logan and Oakley 2004).

Concurrently, White flight was underway as White families moved into neighborhoods and school districts that were predominantly White in order to avoid this integration (Howell and Caisey 2019; Coleman, Kelly and Moore 1975; Fiel 2013; Orfield et al. 2014; Reardon and Owens 2014; Rothstein 2015; Wells et al. 2009). A loophole in the court mandate to desegregate schools within a district did not call for desegregation between districts, so White families were able to move into school districts that were mainly White and suburban. The rapid emergence of the choice movement and charter schools was another response to desegregation orders. White families were making the choice to pull their children out of the schools in their neighborhoods as they became increasingly racially diverse, to enroll them in schools that were racially White (Bischoff and Tach 2018; Chapman and Donnor 2015; Riel et al. 2018; Roda and Wells 2013; Howell and Caisey 2019). Charter schools served as a means to fulfilling these actions. These private institutions were more exclusive, providing a higher level of quality.

By the mid to late 1980s Black students were re-segregated in much of the South and the border states (Orfield and Lee 2007). Much of the research on school segregation tends to focus on the Black-White differences due to the remnants of slavery within the U.S. and these racial groups are under investigation within this study because the school that serves as a field site is a Black-White school with a majority of Black students. Research also tends to focus on the within district and between school differences in segregation (Reardon and Owens 2014). This broader segregation across districts and schools is mirrored at the classroom level, but in a way that may not be expected. White families benefit from tracking within racially diverse schools, as white students are overwhelmingly tracked into advanced placement classes and Black students are pushed into lower track courses. It becomes clear that Black girls are underrepresented within these classrooms.

Tracking Within Schools

Tracking is the process by which students are put into certain classes based on ability (Oakes 2005). “Ability” can be subjective as students who are perceived by teachers to be more equipped to handle the rigor of these classes are tracked into advanced placement and honors courses. Sometimes “ability” can perceptually be based on a student’s “appropriate” behavior rather than on the student’s actual caliber of work and intellect. The social consequences of tracking students, even in racially diverse schools, perpetuates the inequality in life opportunities for certain groups of students (Oakes 2005). Students of color and students from lower socioeconomic class groups tend to suffer most and benefit least from tracking (Oakes 2005).

Research shows that Black and Native American Students are the least likely to pass AP exams because they are segregated into schools and school districts with fewer academic resources and lower AP passing rates (Howell and Caisey 2018). Even when these students attend integrated schools they are less likely than their White peers to be tracked into AP classes and/or thrive in these classes once they have access to them. White and Asian students are more likely to be tracked into advanced placement classes, perpetuating stereotypes that exist about racial groups and intelligence level (Lee and Zhou 2015). This inequality may be the result of the remnants of racialized tracking programs at the elementary and middle school levels, racial disparities in school discipline, racial inequity in those who are registering for the AP exam, and the socioeconomic and racial dynamics of the classroom (Howell and Caisey 2018; Lee and Zhou 2015; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lucas 1999; Tyson 2011). Another factor impacting student accessibility to AP classes is parental involvement and influence (Lewis and Diamond 2015). White parents are more likely to threaten to leave a school if their children are not selected into certain tracks.

Contemporary Educational Inequality

The structure of the education system in the United States has set the tone for the inequality that has carried over into the present. There is not a national centralized education system today, and local and city governments maintain control over elementary and secondary education in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education 2005). This lack of centralization led communities impacted to take matters into their own hands. The rapid emergence of the Choice Movement and Charter Schools provided those in opposition to merging a way to select the schools they wanted their children to attend. For those unable to escape or choosing to stay in schools and districts impacted by the merging of school districts and schools, tracking served as a method of segregating students within the school. The remnants of this practice can be seen in schools across the U.S. and at the site used for this study. Within this historical context, a Critical Race Theory lens works best to unpack the ways in which Black students are stratified within the U.S. education system. The multiple tenets of CRT (intersectionality, colorblindness, storytelling) serve as an appropriate framework for the study of Black girls in AP classes.

4.0 Data and Methodology

Case Study: Lakeland Spring Junior Senior High School¹

The Lakeland Spring School District has undergone a tumultuous and continuous shift since the passing of a controversial ruling to end segregation within the county schools in this western Pennsylvania city. In 1981, the federal ruling mandated the merging of the Lakeland Spring School District with four other school districts (Oakes & Welner 2005). The outcome of this merger was resistance from parents whose children attended primarily White schools who did not want their children to be bussed to school. These parents felt it would save money for their children to walk to a closer school. When the merger first took place in 1981, the district began with 9,132 students, 83 percent White and 17 percent Black. As of 2016, that number dropped to 3,828 students, 65 percent Black and 29 percent White (Oakes & Welner 2005). Additionally, 1,137 students who live within the districts attend a charter school or a cyber charter school. Seventy-four percent of the students within the district are considered to be economically disadvantaged and the rate for graduation was worse than the rates for about 90 percent of school districts in the state during the 2014-15 school year (Oakes & Welner 2005). When the merger was first put into place, the state covered 90 percent of the desegregation costs, which included costs associated with discipline, after-school programming and curriculum. After the district filed for unitary status from the courts in 1999, claiming the district had done everything in its power under the desegregation order to make sure the school was integrated, change for the worse began to

¹ Pseudonym for the junior senior high school where the case study took place

occur. By 2003 the school was no longer under court supervision, which also meant that the supplemental state funding the school had been receiving stopped as well. Programs that had been put into place to increase educational equality were halted due to a lack of funding, and professionals that had been hired to increase the quality of educational resources could no longer be paid by the district. Under the consent order there had been an increase in the number of Black students taking AP classes and receiving high scores on AP tests. By 2013, Black students made up only 22 percent of students taking AP classes, and barely any were taking advanced level STEM courses such as AP Chemistry and Calculus BC. In 2013, an American Civil Liberties Union study listed Lakeland Spring High School among local school districts with the highest rates of suspension across Pennsylvania, and the same study found that Black students in Pennsylvania were five times more likely to be suspended than White students (Oakes & Welner 2005). Although the merger of five school districts to create LSHS was supposed to desegregate the school, it manifested in a new kind of segregation and marginalization within the school. While a majority of the students attending the school are Black, only 10 percent of professional staff were Black in 2014.

Since this merger, the high school has appeared in the media for acts of brutality against students by school administrators. National studies and findings have shown that students of color are more harshly disciplined and that Black students specifically are more commonly written up for subjective infractions, such as disrespect and subordination (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Welch & Payne, 2018). A commission was formed within the Lakeland Spring School District in 2017 to address acts of violence and aggression against students and that commission has created a report to address concerns of the criminalization of students and Implicit Bias trainings have been implemented for the faculty to attend.

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, as of the 2016-17 school year there were about 1,600 students attending Lakeland Spring Junior Senior High School. The student to teacher ratio is 1:12 and this data is inclusive of grades 7 through 12 (CCD Public School Data, 2016-2017; NCES, 2019). The Civil Rights Data Collection shows that in 2015, White students made up 61.9 percent of students taking at least 1 AP class, while Black students made up only 33.7 percent (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015). In the same year White students made up 64 percent of students taking AP math classes and 70.3 percent of students taking AP science classes, while Black students made up 29.1 percent of students taking AP math classes and 21.6 percent of students taking AP science classes. These figures show that the racial percentage of students in the school, 64.5 percent Black and 31.4 percent White, is not proportional to those represented in AP classes.

LSHS's policy is located within the school's Curriculum Planning Guide, a blue booklet that is distributed to students in the beginning of the school year. Under section reading "Weighted Courses and AP Courses" there is a list of courses for which weighted credit will be given including a list of AP classes, Spanish V, French V, Honors Humanities and Cultural Roots, and College Physics. Beneath this it reads:

"While there are no set eligibility criteria for these classes, students need to consult with their current teachers and guidance counselors before selecting an AP level course. A solid GPA and excellent attendance are two indicators of possible success. Students who fail to achieve a 70% or better during the first marking period may be reassigned to another course at the appropriate grade level."

In order to uncover more about the process of gaining access to AP classes as it applies to Black girls at LSHS, I utilized the qualitative methods of in-depth interviewing and classroom observations for this study. I was granted permission by the principal of the junior high school and received official approval to conduct this study by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pittsburgh. I interviewed girls using snowball sampling and was connected to some of the them by a teacher and the director of the College Resource Center. Contact with the director of the College Resource Center helped with the recruitment of girls and helped me to find private spaces within the school to conduct the interviews. Prior to conducting any of the interviews within the school, I did offer to interview girls elsewhere, in the case that a location outside of the school would be more comfortable. All of the participants were comfortable with being interviewed in private rooms within the school.

Positionality of the Researcher

I approach this research from the standpoint of a Black cisgender woman researcher who can identify with the research participants as an insider to a certain extent. I graduated from a public secondary education institution in northeastern Pennsylvania 8 years ago. During that time, I was the only Black girl in my AP classes. My status as both a graduate student and a researcher sets me apart from the girls I interview for this study as an outsider, but my positionality as the only Black woman in many professional situations demonstrates the extent of the problem of underrepresentation in areas where there is a perceived level of achievement or success. I took honors classes in geometry, English, and world cultures history as a first-year high school student. As a high school student, I was the only Black girl in my advanced placement history and English classes. I noticed this immediately and compared these classes to my regular track general science class. In this science class there was a mix of students of different races. The environment was

noticeably different between these classes as well. While AP teachers presented their classes as rigorous and content heavy, overall, they were invested in the students and responded in a less dismissive way to students' questions. Many of my regular track teachers were less patient with students. Disciplinary issues were more likely to be addressed in the regular track classes. Students were sent out of the classroom more often in the regular track classes. I do not recall any incidents of student discipline within my AP or honors classes.

This experience inspired me to pursue this topic of research. A few years after graduating high school, a Black female friend from high school and I sat and discussed our experiences in high school. Her academic experience was much different than mine because she had taken all regular track courses. She processed feeling as if she had not learned anything while we were in high school, and her first time really putting effort into writing a paper was during college. I was shocked to learn that the regular track English classes never required students to read a single book in its entirety. Taking honors or AP classes in high school led many to classify someone as "smart", so I remember hearing my peers describe me in this way. Reflecting back, I remember wondering if this meant that there were no other "smart" Black girls in my grade. Today this idea is ridiculous, but a lack of representation led to a certain set of assumptions. Black girls were stereotyped as funny, loud, and out-going. They were also pushed into physical altercations with other girls in an effort to establish toughness and popularity. The White students in my AP classes came from a different class background and were able to participate in things that I did not have access to.

Data

For this study, I interviewed 16 Black girls in AP, honors, and regular track classes, 1 mother of girls interviewed, 5 AP teachers, the guidance counselor for the senior class, and the principal. Data collection was conducted from the Summer of 2018 to the Spring of 2019.

Interviews were conducted at Lakeland Spring Junior Senior High School, a Barnes & Noble in the community, and at the office of one mother interviewed. Observations for this study were conducted within AP classes at the junior senior high school and I was able to attend one Implicit Bias training for teachers at the school.

Black Girls

I interviewed both girls in AP, honors, regular and any mix of the three in order to have comparative perspectives. The AP program offers a structure that allows students to choose their courses on a class by class basis. For this reason, the girls I interviewed were at different points academically and had different experiences. One participant, Amanda, for example chose to take AP science and math classes after her junior year of high school. She realized after taking all AP classes that she was spreading herself thin and wanted to focus on fields of study applicable to career aspirations in the medical field. Amanda is one student who also participated in the gifted and talented program since elementary school. Some of the girls taking AP classes had attended charter schools up until starting high school. Most of the girls interviewed were also involved in extra-curricular activities and were employed part time.

Teachers

Of the five advanced placement teachers from Lakeland Spring High School, three are from the city where the school is located while two are from areas no more than 1.5 hours away from the city. Three of the teachers identified as White men, and two identified as White women belonging to the middle class socioeconomically. The interviews took place a week after school let out for the summer and trash cans were set up in the hallways as teachers tossed unneeded items into them from the school year cleaning their classrooms. The teachers interviewed teach the

following AP classes: AP European History, AP English Literature, AP Calculus, AP Statistics, AP U.S. History, AP Comparative Government.

5.0 Findings

Girls interviewed for this study take any combination of AP, honors, and regular classes. Some of the girls are not taking any honors or AP classes currently. The AP program offers a structure that allows students to choose their courses on a class by class basis. For this reason, the girls I interviewed were at different points academically and had different experiences. The girls interviewed identify as Black or African American, with the exception of one girl whose family is from Cameroon in Central Africa. This girl identified with the Cameroon nationality and culture, but faced experiences central to ideas around Blackness within a U.S. context. Two of the interviewees I was connected with after interviewing their mother. Another interviewee contacted me after I asked the AP U.S. History teacher to email my information to students regarding the study. Response after the first three interviews was slow, so I connected with a faculty member in the College Resource Center who had access to a database showing Black girls in AP classes. She sent emails out to these girls and to girls in honors and regular track courses. I was able to interview girls 18 and older without a parental consent, but could only interview girls younger than 18 years old after they submitted a signed consent form. Only 2 of the girls who volunteered to be interviewed were 18 years old out of a total of 16 girls interviewed. Because of the need to bring in a signed consent form, response was slow. Girls in grades ranging from 9-12 were interviewed in order to capture multiple experiences at different milestones, but the majority of participants interviewed were juniors and seniors because of their accessibility to AP classes and common experiences with the guidance counselor. Socioeconomically the girls identified as “Lower class”, “Middle class”, and “Working class” on a paper form that I provided them at the end of the interview. All of the interviewees identified as “female/girls”. Of the girls who were interviewed,

a few of them have been in the Gifted and Talented program since elementary school. Others have spent time at academy schools and charter schools before attending LSHS.

The demographic data in Table 1 provide a summary of key information about the girls, but for this research I focus on key themes in order to tell a story about their experiences with tracking into AP classes. Overall, interviews with the girls, a parent, teachers, a guidance counselor, and the principal point to three mechanisms in the perpetuation of inequitable practices regarding accessibility to information about AP classes. These three mechanisms are microaggressions and stereotyping inflicted on Black girls, teachers' colorblind attitudes, and the lack of a clear process and policy in which information about access is distributed.

Table 1 Student Interviewees

Pseudonym	Type of Courses	Age	Grade	SES/Family Class	Racial/Ethnic Identity
Lydia	AP U.S. History, AP Environmental Science, honors English, has taken honors since 8 th grade	16	11	Working Class	Black
Tammy	AP English, AP Euro, honors humanities; has taken honors since 9 th grade; has always taken regular math,	18	12	Lower Class	African American
Apryl	AP Euro; This year is her first year taking AP/honors	18	12	Median	Black/African American
Amanda	Honors English, AP math and AP science	17	12	Lower Class	Black/African American
Lisa	AP Euro, honors English; has taken honors English and Social Studies throughout HS	17	12	Middle Class	African American
Janet	AP English, AP Probability and Stats(math); Has taken honors since 9 th grade	17	12	Middle Class	African American
Ana	Honors English, AP Stats, AP Euro, honors chem., honors physics, honors bio.	17	12	Working Class	African American

Kara	AP English, AP Statistics, AP Comp. Gov., AP Physics 2, and Spanish 5	17	12	Lower end of the middle class	African American and Native American
Sheyenne	Honors English, Honors History in the past (dropped this year); No AP classes	17	12	Middle Class	African American
Tanya	Dropped AP classes, took honors in the past	17	12	Lower Class	African American
Jackie	Currently in honors geometry (1 st honors class); Forbes culinary program	16	11	Middle Class	African American
Michelle	AP US History, AP English	16	11	Lower Class	African American
Dana	No honors or AP	17	12	Middle Class	African American
Shanti	Has taken honors English and honors history in the past	17	12	Middle Class	Cameroonian
Mer	Honors civics, switching into honors English	14	9	Middle Class	African American
Gabby	Honors classes	16	10	Under Middle Class	African American

5.1 Microaggressions and Stereotyping

LSSH Parent

During an interview with Tasha, a mother of two girls attending Lakeland Spring High School, she discusses her early experiences going through the education system in New Jersey in relation to the decisions she makes regarding her daughters' education. Tasha is the only parent interviewed for this study and we were able to meet through a mutual contact. Tasha is an African American mother of four who lives with her children and husband. She identifies as middle class socioeconomically. I met Tasha at her place of employment at a local university where she does instructional development work full-time, while simultaneously pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of education. Tasha's research is central to the inclusion of Black girls in STEM programming in high schools. Tasha has four children and two who are currently students at Lakeland Spring High School. Tasha went to school in the cities of Newark and Montclair in New Jersey and took AP and honors classes in a racially diverse high school. When describing how she came to access honors courses as a student, she talks about the benefits of having one teacher who saw her talents in math. Prior to transferring from a public school in Newark to a more reputable public school in Montclair, Tasha had been told she was not good at math by teachers up until this point. She recalls one incident specifically in which her mother comes to the high school in Montclair for parent teacher conference:

Tasha: I really do believe that they had lower expectations of me. And I didn't of course know this at the time, but now I look back on that and think yeah little Black girl from Newark coming up in there having no experience in a district like Montclair until 9th grade. I'm sure they had preconceived notions about how this was going to go. So I have certain things that I can point

to that are narrative based. Like I don't, I can't kind of globalize the experience, but I do remember my mother coming to 9th grade parent teacher conferences and her first stop was always math because we had had all kinds of problems over the years with my performance in math course. So she stops at this woman's classroom, I will never forget her name it was Ms. (pseudonym) and she made math like a ballet for me. I just got it! I was engaged. I loved the way she taught concepts, but my mom goes in there and Ms. (pseudonym) said 'oh yes I want to talk to you about your daughter'. And my mom said 'I know, I know. She's always been bad at math. She gets that from me'. Really critical moment of generational abuse of teachers telling you you're not good at something. And Ms.(pseudonym) who was like a pretty stoic person, she would just kind of be even-keeled all of the time, got this look on her face of complete shock and horror. And she says to my mother 'I must have the wrong child.' And when she told my mom that I had actually gotten straight As so far that year and that she was just like, 'I was actually going to ask you if you would mind me recommending her for honors geometry'. My mother was floored! She was just like (laughs) what.

In Tasha's case, going back to the 1980s, it took a teacher to recognize her talents in order for her to try an advanced level of math. She felt that her teachers had low expectations of her as a student and this caused her to internalize negative feelings about her on abilities regarding subjects like mathematics. Her mother had already been socialized to believe that even she was "bad" at math and projected this expectation onto Tasha as a teenager. This 'generational abuse of teachers' that Tasha talks about is exactly what she works to protect her own daughters from. In another situation, Tasha recalls an AP U.S. History teacher attempting to convince her to track down in the course. In response, Tasha's mom came into the school to advocate on her behalf:

Tasha: She told my mom that she didn't think I belonged in that class and she wanted her to consider having me drop down to an honors level course, which I'm sure you can imagine my mother was like not having it. Of all things, history you know what she was really uniquely interested in I think. But I think she also.. I think it's hard to readily identify systems of racial oppression in courses like math or science. Like this didn't happen because you're Black right? But when it came to history when I told her (mother) 'well you know, she didn't like my answers in the essay I wrote about the Fugitive Slave Act' my mother was like I bet she didn't. It was really a lot more easy to identify places where there could have been bias. And so she kept me in there.

Tasha acknowledges the systems of racial oppression that are easier to pinpoint. She recognizes the ease in which this marginalization and oppression can be spotted in social sciences subjects like U.S. History in opposed to a mathematics course. Tasha describes the blatant experiences of discrimination she experienced as a high school student, which may not be as surprising considering the time period in which she attended high school. What is more disappointing are the ways in which she addresses similar instances of discrimination on behalf of her own daughters over 20 years later.

Tasha began to learn more about tracking at Lakeland Spring High School when her oldest daughter, who has since graduated and is currently in her 3rd year of college, took honors and AP classes at the high school. As an elementary school student, Tasha's oldest daughter was encouraged by a teacher to take a test for giftedness and was deemed gifted after receiving high scores in reading and math. It was at this point that Tasha learned about the Individualized Education Program and how it could be used to meet the needs of her daughter who was

academically gifted. As her second daughter entered school, Gabby, Tasha began to notice a similar pattern in her school performance. Tasha approached Gabby's teacher to tell her that she felt her daughter was gifted, but the response from this teacher was much different than the support she received from her older daughter's teacher a few years prior.

Tasha: And then my 14-year-old I started to notice some of the same things and so I approached her teacher and said I think she's gifted. And she said no, she's not. And so, I had learned from this other guy that as a parent I have the right to ask for the testing whether they agree with me or not. So, I did that and low and behold, she was gifted too.

Tasha had to advocate on behalf of her daughter Gabby in order to ensure that her academic needs were being met. As someone who faced similar barriers as a student early on and as a parent connected to a network of individuals with knowledge of the ins and outs of navigating the education system, Tasha was able to challenge the teacher's judgment when it came to her daughter's academic status. She continued:

Tasha: I think the worst part was that this was a teacher that my daughter adored. She really liked this woman and to have her not, so there it is again, not share that enthusiasm. I was like, 'She likes you! She works hard for you!' It just didn't cross her mind.

As Tasha continues to deal with the challenges of making sure her girls are not overlooked academically, she simultaneously must confront microaggressions from teachers who seem to lack a knowledge of systemic oppression and marginalization as it applies to education curriculum.

Tasha attends a parent teacher conference for her youngest daughter, Mer, and the following occurs:

Tasha: I went to parent teacher conferences last week and I listened to this litany of people talking about how she's not doing her work and one woman told me all about how she isn't interested in history, and I was like yeah is any of the history about her. And the woman said, 'Oh yeah we talk about slaves.' And I was like yeah, can you see how that might be a problem? It's just really hard to deal with some of these things... So I think there's a lot to be said for the messages a child gets about what you think they can't do. And I think that the guy who told me that my oldest daughter was gifted was an anomaly. I think that generally the teachers that I've come across in my district are much more likely to tell my children what they can't do.

Teachers have gone as far as asking her daughters how they got their hair 'like this' and other microaggressions that are uncalled for in a school in which Black students make up 65 percent of the student body. One of Tasha's daughters was escorted out of a class by a police officer for eating fried chicken in a class where White students were eating cupcakes, yet the white students were not removed from the classroom. Tasha was called after the incident occurred, but was not informed that an officer had removed her daughter from the room until her daughter informed her of this detail. In response, Tasha scheduled a meeting with the teacher to address this incident which she felt was racially motivated after speaking with her daughter. Tasha worries that some of the cultural symbols within the school, for example a 'Blue Lives Matter' flag hanging in the school resource office, may send her daughters the wrong messages.

Tasha: In there they have a flag hanging up that is a black and white version of the American flag with a blue line through it. So this flag is from a counter movement called Blue Lives Matter and the idea was that they weren't going to deal with the Black Lives Matter movement. That instead they were gonna subvert it. Make it oppositional. And you know I think about that, my daughter's have to walk by everyday and that's the message you get when you go to the place where discipline occurs in the school. Those kinds of messages are kind of throughout and I'd really like to examine those kinds of things.

With the school's history of brutality against Black students, these types of symbols do not provide students with an environment that is safe for learning. If anything, the lack of care from teachers, cultural symbols, and the microaggressions that Tasha and her daughters are forced to confront daily provide an environment that is hostile to the achievement of Black students.

Interviews with Girls

A clear theme of school spirit and pride connected the stories of many of the girls interviewed. Gabby and Mer were the first two students from Lakeland Spring High School interviewed for this study. These students are sisters and their mother, Tasha, was interviewed early on for her perspective as a parent of students attending school at Lakeland Spring. Tasha's oldest daughter graduated from Lakeland Spring High School and is now attending college. Gabby is a sophomore and Mer is a first-year student at the high school. Gabby and Mer are both currently taking honors classes, but intend on taking AP classes by their junior years when these courses are made available to them. Throughout the interview, both girls are able to acknowledge the shortcomings of their school while simultaneously showing their appreciation for the positive aspects of the school. In fact, Mer even goes as far to say that she typically enjoys every day at

school. Gabby shows a sense of school spirit and participates in the student council. In the earlier interview with their mother Tasha, she says the girls had the opportunity to attend a private school, but chose not to for a few different reasons:

Tasha: So, one that they talk about a lot is the idea that their school is misrepresented. Often times the bad things. People always talk about the bad stuff and my 15 year old will say 'Mom if kids like us leave, whose going to be there to highlight the good at our school.' Another thing that they think is when they have this sense of ownership, so my 14 year old is like 'I've been here since kindergarten. I'm not going anywhere.' And she will say things like 'No, the superintendent should leave.' He did by the way. But you know such a powerful statement, like no I shouldn't be the one who's thinking about leaving, he should leave. He's the one who can't run the school.

Gabby and Mer take on a personal responsibility to ensure that their school is improving, while addressing the systemic barriers of problematic administrators that have since left, but who have left a negative mark on the school.

Lydia is a junior at LSHS who started going to school within the district in 9th grade. Lydia is taking AP U.S. History and honors English right now. She is a student who contacted me directly after the AP U.S. History teacher sent out an email to students about the research. We decided to meet at a local Barnes & Noble bookstore to conduct the interview. Lydia wore pigtails in her hair and was full of energy during the interview. Growing up, Lydia went from living with her mother to now living with her father, who expects her to challenge herself academically by taking AP

classes. Much like Gabby and Mer she likes going to school as LSHS despite it's problems and "drama". She says that the teachers are helpful and that the education is "great":

Lydia: Lakeland Spring is a great school whether you think that or not from watching the news and you learn well, if you try honestly it takes a lot more work to fail than it is to pass. So you will get a great education if you actually try to you know, so and it's the kids are great. There are like the 1% there that aren't great and they're like not model students or whatever like not even like model but like average students like we're all great people.

Lydia takes pride in her school and believes that some students give the school a bad reputation. In this statement she is attributing the behaviors of a few bad students to the school's reputation. Ironically, Lydia does describe being stopped in the hallways at school for questionable reasons:

Lydia: No, I don't really get I don't get disrespected. I don't really like talk to anyone basically or do anything that would cause me to get disrespected. Basically. Um (pause) I don't know some teachers some people do like expect me to like because I'm - I don't wanna say because I'm Black or whatever but like to like be a bad student [00:25:33] or something. I'll be like walking down the hallway and they're like looking at me. Like where's your pass? This and this and im like here's my pass or like what are you doing? I'm like I'm fine or I'm just I don't know just you know just be talking or something and I just get yelled at or something like that. I'm like, I'm a good student. You don't have to yell at me to do something. All you have to do is ask me because I'm not

gonna yell at you just ask me like a normal human because I'm not five. I follow directions. Just tell me, don't yell at me.

Lydia says that she doesn't want to attribute this treatment in the hallway to the fact that she is Black, yet she mentions it in this situation where she feels as if she is being targeted and yelled at. She negotiates these feelings by describing herself as a "good" student in disbelief of the treatment she receives. Lydia is self-policing herself in order to assure teachers, administrators and staff at the school that she is a "normal human." Although she takes pride in her school, she doesn't feel like the school is a safe environment because of the violent acts that have occurred over the past year and because staff and faculty talk about students. In reference to being one of the few Black girls in AP and honors classes, Lydia goes on to say:

Lydia: I noticed stuff. Like there's not really many black girls in AP classes or honors courses and um we're not really like treated as fairly, like when we're like upset we're like seen as like, I don't know like causing the disruption instead of like them actually like wondering what's wrong with us. We get sent out of class a lot and we're like judged a lot and that's not really okay.

Lydia doesn't necessarily see these trends daily in her AP classes, but she says it happens in the classroom generally and in other places more broadly. In other situations, Lydia believes that her status as a Black girl in AP classes differentiates her from "other" Black girls as she discusses the labeling and stereotyping of Black girls:

Lydia: I definitely think I do get treated differently because I umm.. I may be Black, but I'm taking all AP classes, I'm like intelligent I guess. And people probably like, I don't know, value what I say more than someone who's less like umm in like AP classes and umm, I don't know. I'm trying to explain, like I think, I don't know... Let me think, wait a second [pauses]. I get treated differently because I don't know, I guess I'm not seen as like 'Oh there's the ratchet Black girl in the class' you know what I mean? I'm like seen as like smart I guess and like I don't know, well-behaved in a sense and it's like 'Oh, Lydia's cool' and I'm like.. you know what I mean?

Interviewer: So, is that how Black girls are stereotyped?

Lydia: Yeah! Definitely, definitely at Lakeland Spring. Black girls have like a negative persona to them. Like we're like ratchet and loud and ghetto.

Interviewer: To who?

Lydia: A lot. Not even just White people. The Black people or like everyone. The teachers. They definitely notice that too and it's like... that's not acceptable to me, you know what I mean. And I definitely feel like I still get treated like the Black girl in the room, but not as intensely as someone that doesn't like, you know, speak like me or act like me, you know what I mean? I don't think it's fair.

Lydia goes on to say that everyone feeds into these stereotypes about Black girls, including teachers. She says that race, gender and class are never discussed in school and that teachers are visibly uncomfortable talking about race. This is to the point where teachers will refrain from stating someone's race in instances that may call for the identifying of someone's race. Lydia's statements exemplify the harsh reality of colorblind racism in the classroom as teachers actively

avoid topics related to race. Within her statements it is clear that Black girls recognize that these teachers are stereotyping them through their treatment or lack thereof.

Some of the interviewees took honors classes in the past and decided not to this year. Shanti, a first generation 17-year-old who identifies most closely with her Cameroonian identity, discussed her feelings about Blackness and other Black girls. She is not in advanced placement or honors courses, but she works on a neighborhood youth project and as an Americorps intern. Shanti says that she does not identify as Black, but instead she identifies as a Cameroonian and says this is because she knows where she is from and is “more connected” with her roots. She describes other Black girls as “typical” Black girls and talks about the ways in which Black girls are stereotyped. This is an instance in which one of the girls establishes her own identity through the othering of “other” Black girls. Stereotype threat has created an “us” vs. “them” mentality for this girl in her sense making of being an “atypical” Black girl. Even though Shanti positions herself oppositional to other Black girls, she says that she does get treated differently because she is perceived as a Black girl. She says that teachers at LSHS treat Black students differently than they teach White students and that this difference is “obvious.” As an example, she recalls an incident where a teacher called a security officer to escort Shanti out of the classroom because she asked to use the restroom and the teacher did not want to let her go. Shanti says that White students do not have to go through similar situations. She also discusses another incident when a white substitute teacher would not let Shanti use her writing pen, but had let a White male student use the pen moments prior to Shanti asking. The teacher told Shanti she could not use the pen and instead handed her a pen off the desk by the tip. She has also experienced teachers and administrators trying to force her to remove cultural hair wraps/scarves from her head. During this incident her aunt was called because she refused to remove the head wrap. This discriminatory incident became

even more micro-aggressive when the previous school principal, a White woman, provided flat irons and hair products for Black girls who she assumed “didn’t have enough time to get ready in the morning.” Shanti’s life is in a conflictive state as she identifies with her Cameroonian culture that does not recognize Black as a race, while simultaneously living in a society that sees her as Black and in turn results in discriminatory treatment and microaggressions.

Another student utilizes a similar strategy to that used by Shanti to self-define. Sheyenne, a 17-year-old senior who took honors classes up until last year, uses the term “ghetto” when referring to Black students, but does not use similar terminology for White students. She starts by telling me about the racial composition of the honors classes she has taken.

Sheyenne: It’s just a mixture of Black and White people, but the Black people are like... they’re not the ghetto ones. They’re the ones that actually wanna learn something. So yeah.

Interviewer: Are the White people ever ghetto?

Sheyenne: Uhuh (shaking head no). Not at all. They all come from Foxhill. (laughs)

Interviewer: And is Foxhill stereotyped in a certain way?

Sheyenne: It’s just where the rich people live.

Interviewer: Okay.

Sheyenne: Yeah around the corner, you see all the big houses. If you go down the street.

Interviewer: Okay. And so rich people don’t act ghetto?

Sheyenne: Nope! (laughs)

Through this dialogue with Sheyenne she has conflated class and race with notions of being “ghetto” and sees herself in opposition to this stereotype. In these instances, the self-valuation and

self-definition of Black girls is being challenged, and girls react in different ways in response to this attack on their personhoods. This sometimes results in a separating of the “bad” and “ghetto” Black people from the “good” Black girls. These dichotomies do not take the matrix of intersectional characteristics that create individual experiences into consideration. Whiteness becomes synonymous with a higher level of class, and therefore closer to “goodness”.

5.2 Perpetuation of Inequality through Colorblindness

Interviews with the senior guidance counselor and some of the AP teachers along with classroom observations informed colorblindness as a mechanism through which inequality is perpetuated. Within these examples, teachers and guidance counselors are acting in ways that negate the positionalities and identities of their students. Furthermore, they fail to consider the hostile impact of their whiteness and the ways in which they enact it during their interactions with Black students.

Senior Guidance Counselor

After learning about many of the girl’s negative experiences with guidance counselors, specifically the guidance counselor for seniors, I was able to interview this guidance counselor. When I initially reached out to the guidance counselors at the high school via email, my emails were left unanswered after numerous attempts. A substitute guidance counselor was the only person to respond via email saying she felt that her input into the research would be useless because of her role a substitute. I attempted to reassure her that her perspective would be useful to the study, but never received a follow up response. I finally was able to interview Mr. Muncy after

interviewing the principal of the school, Dr. Moore. I informed Dr. Moore of the difficulties I was having reaching any of the counselors and he called into Mr. Muncy's office with me sitting there and asked him to do an interview with me. Mr. Muncy agreed and so I was able to complete an interview with the guidance counselor most relevant to this study, as he was mentioned by name during interviews with many of the girls. Prior to meeting Mr. Muncy, I had heard numerous stories from the girls I interviewed about his lack of responsiveness to the students' needs. With the exception of one girl, all expressed dissatisfaction with the guidance office. Mr. Muncy is the only guidance counselor for the senior class.

Ana, a senior in honors and AP classes, discussed her feelings about an interaction with the guidance counselor:

Ana: Like he [Mr. Muncy] won't...like during the summer we were trying to figure out our schedules and he was just like not responding at first, but yea most of the time he was not responding and then when we got to talk to him, we asked him like well that's not the class that we chose. He just said, 'well, I just hurried up and did it and I just put you guys in any classes that y'all could fit in' and it's just like we have requirements like, if we're missing something then for graduation, we're not gonna be able to walk and it's not on you. It's on us. And you're the person making the schedule. You're supposed to be making sure that we're in the right classes.

Through this encounter, Ana felt as if Mr. Muncy showed carelessness in helping students to select appropriate courses for the new school year. It seemed to Ana that Mr. Muncy did not have the time to help students.

Amanda is in the process of applying to colleges and she is worried that going to the guidance counselor for guidance with this and with course selection may not be her best option. She has always gone to the teacher who is teaching the course directly or to another student who is taking the course.

Amanda: AD: I would go to the teacher. The guidance counselor, He's...we have two for the like the ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth grades last time I checked we had two and they're overbooked scheduling and I'll have to go to them to submit my college applications and I don't know if that would be the best person to ask about a course.

Amanda will only go to the guidance counselor to look at the Curriculum Planning Guide that shows the list of available courses, but does not go to the counselor with assistance choosing and learning about the process.

Mr. Muncy grew up in the area and has worked as a guidance counselor for LSHS for 12 years. He chose to do this kind of work because he had always wished that he had a guidance counselor that he could connect with during high school. Mr. Muncy felt disconnected from his high school counselors and believes that the job of a school counselor is comprehensive and must engage the student socially and academically. He believes that his students know he wants to see them succeed. When asked about his positionality, Mr. Muncy connects his positionality to growing up in the area and to his knowledge of career pathways from witnessing the various career paths his siblings chose within his white middle class family growing up. He does not connect his positionality to race or gender during the interview. When Mr. Muncy explains the process of students getting into AP classes he focuses heavily on making “informed decisions.” This process

as explained by Mr. Muncy involves students making “informed decisions” with their parents and guidance counselor. Having teacher recommendations contributes to these “informed decisions” and conversations that students have with their parents. In cases where there are not parents who can be actively engaged, Mr. Muncy says that the guidance counselor should sit with the student to make the “informed decision.” When I ask Mr. Muncy what kinds of students are in honors and AP classes he says:

Mr. Muncy: Yeah, um I would say students that are persistent or resilient. (pause) My guess is you know, because honors classes and AP classes or do require a lot both in school and out of school. So I would say students that have the ability to overcome adversity, you know and push through push through push through uncomfortable um feelings academic feelings personal feelings career feelings.

This ability that students should have to “push through uncomfortable feelings” draws on ideas about personal responsibility and this process of thinking comes up another time during the interview when Mr. Muncy says that at the end of the day it is “up to the student’s desire or drive” when there is not a parent actively engaged. This statement does not seem to take the idea of equity into consideration at all. If some students have a great amount of parent involvement and therefore have access to opportunities, it is not fair to say that it is up to the student’s without actively engaged parents to seek these opportunities. When they don’t pursue these opportunities it, then it seems that Mr. Muncy would think they did not have the “desire or drive” to seek these opportunities.

AP Teachers

Mr. Hanlon teaches AP European History and he is from right outside of the city living here his entire life. Mr. Hanlon has worked as an educator since graduating college with degrees in history and education. Mr. Hanlon believes that academically successful students have a “degree of positivity” and a “positive outlook” on life. Additionally, academically successful students are self-disciplined and goal-driven. He puts emphasis on the “internal drive” of the students. This emphasis puts more onus on the student to achieve than on any other actor or force (teacher, parent, institution, etc.). When I asked him what outside forces create students like this, Mr. Hanlon stated that parental support was helpful in creating academically successful students. Although this seems to be the case overwhelmingly according to Mr. Hanlon, this is not always the case and some students manage to be successful independent of parental support.

Ms. Kelly teaches AP Calculus and is from the city. She has lived here her entire life and before teaching, she worked as an engineer. She teaches a combination of regular and AP classes. The following is what Ms. Kelly had to say when asked how AP classes compare to lower track classes:

“Usually work ethic. It stands out above everything else there. There are some in AP that don't have the work ethic that they should, but sometimes they can get away with intelligence alone. Uhh the best students have both a strong work ethic and the intelligence. Umm sometimes lower level classes, there's some very intelligent kids in there, but they just don't care to do much of anything. Umm and then there are some who truly do have decent work ethic that they just struggle with math. Usually, like a lot of times my students with IEPs they will, they tend to have stronger

work ethics than other kids in the class, but they just really struggle in general and genuinely do struggle with concepts.”

In Ms. Kelly’s, Mr. Hanlon’s, and Mr. Smith’s statements about the most academically successful students there is not mention of inequality or lack of representation within their classes. There are themes related to meritocracy and personal responsibility interwoven throughout their various responses that removes any teacher responsibility.

In contrast to these teachers, Ms. Armstrong immediately began the conversation before the interview technically began mentioning topics related to race and education. She was passionate about the topic of racial inequality in schools and later informed me that a family member of hers worked in academia within the city studying Urban Education. Ms. Armstrong mentioned stereotype threat in our conversation, stating that she had been reading about this theory lately. She has been working for the district for 22 years and grew up in a working-class family. Ms. Armstrong talked to me about the lack of girls represented in advanced STEM courses and the underrepresentation of people of color in AP courses generally. In the interview, she connects larger ideas such as the desegregation merger in the 1980s to students of color attending the school today. Ms. Armstrong was the only teacher interviewed to openly discuss the topics of race and gender as they relate to education and brought up the conversation without being prompted with any questions on my part. While she was vocal about recognizing the systemic issues that play out within the classroom, she also expressed some hopelessness in her capacity to cause change.

During the interviews the teachers are able to name a series of qualities that academically successful students possess. The individual level characteristics that make students successful are seemingly disconnected from the larger systemic arrangement that grants some students

opportunities at the cost of other students that may not be on a level playing field. Only one teacher openly acknowledged and comfortably discussed the differential impacts of race in the classroom and the other teachers attempted to show me how their actions and philosophies worked to create equality without acknowledgment of the problem.

Observations Within the Classroom

Out of the 13 AP classes offered at Lakeland Spring High School, most of them are taught by male teachers with the exception of 3 courses. Within the classroom, I have observed that most of the AP students in the three courses I observed are White, but that there are a few Black students. In conversations with the teachers for the AP classes it is clear that there is a clear position on who should take the exam, who is in the class in order to be around “other nice kids”, and that some students should not take the AP exam even if they are in the AP class. Teachers seem to be making decisions for students in their AP classes that may not be beneficial to their success in the long run.

Some racialized and gendered trends that I noticed included the prevalence of White male participation in the classroom. Something else I recognized with this prevalence was the likelihood that a White male student would get the answer correct, which was often. There is a White female student who participates often in one of the classes, but compared to the number of White male students who confidently participate it is a difference. The Black students generally seem hesitant to participate in all of the AP courses I have observed, and when they do participate their answers are not validated in the same way as the White students answers. Along with this is the bearing that Whiteness has on the interactions with the teacher. When the White male teacher of AP Comparative Government engaged in conversations about choosing colleges with students, these

students were White. This may be related to comfortability which is felt between White teachers and White students.

A New Principal

The principal of Lakeland Spring Junior Senior High School was interviewed as well. Dr. Moore was hired in the summer of 2018 by the school district in an effort to bring positive change to a school struggling with achievement, attendance, and discipline issues. Dr. Moore identifies as a Black man who grew up in low-income, single parent household as a child and has worked as an educator for 20 years. The girls interviewed discuss seeing positive change in the school since Dr. Moore's hiring. Unlike principals in the past, he is described by the girls as "relatable" and "present". Overall, the girls have seen less violence and more accountability for teachers and students since this change in administration. Dr. Moore says the following regarding his relationships with students:

Dr. Moore: "In some schools the head principal is somebody that the kids don't want to talk to, but I've built a relationship that I'm approachable, that I'm accessible, and that I'm supportive. But at the same time if doing something wrong, I'm addressing that too."

Dr. emphasizes that the school is making progress toward being "unified and inclusive", but that some teachers and students are harboring hard feelings from incidents in the past. A crucial aspect of creating a "unified and inclusive" environment is having:

Dr. Moore: ... common ground understanding, mutual respect to help overcome the barriers associated with the achievement gap, with culturally responsive pedagogy associated with

barriers that are holding our minorities back from learning... So working with students that you identify with you build bonds. You build relationships. You set the goals. You mentor, you inspire and basically again show them how to maneuver through the challenges that are before us.

While he does observe in all of the classrooms throughout the year, he is not always present when decisions regarding tracking and placement in AP classes are made, but has advocated on a student's behalf to make sure they were able to take an AP class. Dr. Moore's figures regarding the racial demographics of students in AP classes were a bit high for the reality of who is actually represented in these classes:

Dr. Moore: We have a good mix of African American and white students in our honors and AP classes. Um I would go back to the same thing, those students who are driven academically who already have a self-identity of what they want to do as far as going to college as far as expanding their careers. I would say (pause) it's probably not 50/50. I would say maybe 65/35, but we have African Americans and even uh Asian students. Uh we have Latino students in our honors and AP courses.

There may be students of color in AP courses, but Black students are underrepresented in these classes, and so this cannot just be a story of personal responsibility. If this was true then it would be safe to say that Black students are not as academically driven as White students, and this is untrue and problematic. Dr. Moore claims that there are no barriers to a student being enrolled into an AP class, but this does not seem to be the case.

Mr. Smith was the first teacher interviewed and I completed most of the classroom observations for this study in his classroom. He teaches AP U.S. History and AP Comparative Government and I sat in on both of these classes. Mr. Smith is from a city about an hour and a half from the area, but has lived within the city for 15 years. He has worked as a teacher in Lakeland Spring HS for 12 years and is now is a teacher and the department coordinator. Concerning the responsiveness of students to teachers' suggestions and help, Mr. Smith says that students in higher track courses are more responsive to the help because they see academics in connection with going to college. For students in regular track courses, they are merely fulfilling a requirement by the Department of Education. Mr. Smith also mentions that these students have not had the "right teachers to draw them in" which puts some of the onus on the teachers. He stresses the importance of teachers forming relationships with their students. Students like Gabby, a 10th grade African American girl taking honors classes finds this process of forming relationships easier said than done:

Gabby: I've never not made the attempt to try and at least connect a little bit with a teacher. I can kind of gauge off of like the first week if that teacher is really umm willing to take an extra step for you and get to know you a little bit. Umm and like also what comes into play like umm being a black girl in a classroom like a lot of these like white male teachers have no relation at all like. And it's umm it's sad, but even in that like I am the type of person to try and not let that hold me back from making that connection with them, you know, because a lot of times a lot of people would just give up and say well, I don't think they would understand anything I'm saying so just move on, but for me like it's really important that I get that connection with them and they know who I am as a person and not just what they see on a piece of paper.

Many of the girls interviewed mentioned their connection with teachers as important for academic success. Gabby is resisting the barriers that exist to her forming these relationships with teachers, despite a lack of comfortability.

5.3 No Clear Process/Policy in Place

Through interviews with girls in AP and honors classes I was able to ask them how they learned about AP courses and about the process of entering these courses. The responses varied and the modes through which girls learned about these classes were numerous. This section is organized by themes that seem to arise across the girls' responses, but the fact that there was not unified response across all interviews is noteworthy.

I Learned About AP and Honors From an Older Sibling

Lydia says she decided to take honors and AP classes because her father told her she had to, but she also admits that she is smart and would get bored in regular track courses. She learned about these classes for the first time from her older brother who went through the same process. She talks about going through a similar process of choosing classes on a form handed out to the class in a group classroom setting. When discussing the extent to which teachers go over this form she says:

Lydia: They go over it like no they kind of go over. I know that last year my chemistry teacher like really went over it. It was like this is the different Sciences. You can choose that. He was only one who actually did that.

The process in which teachers and counselors go over this form with students is not unified, as some teachers like Lydia's chemistry teacher put more effort into explaining the options that students have. She says that in order to take an honors class one must have at least a score of 85 in a regular track class. Lydia says that students know what classes to choose based on what the "next level" is unless they have failed their Keystones. The process that she describes is not one that definitively seems to involve a guidance counselor and there is not designated individualized time for each student to sit with a guidance counselor to go over course options. In fact, if Lydia were to have questions about an honors or AP class she would go directly to the teacher teaching the class because one may be waiting for hours in guidance to meet with a guidance counselor.

Like Lydia, Janet first learned about honors and AP classes in 7th grade from her older siblings. One of her older sisters took honors and AP classes at the school. Janet took honors and AP "just to take it" and figured it may be challenging. She says that honors and AP classes are easier than regular classes because there is less work. As an example, she says that there is more work in honors English than there is in AP English. Janet says another benefit of taking AP is a higher GPA because AP classes are weighted and taking AP looks good on your transcript. Janet plans to attend college so these are important factors for her.

Kara attended an academy school before attending the high school so she was able to take her first AP class her sophomore year. During elementary school in first grade, Kara was recommended for Gifted by a teacher. She was in AP Calculus AB by sophomore year of high

school. Kara first learned about honors and AP classes from her older sister who attended high school two years prior to Kara starting. Her sister explained the courses as classes that move at a faster pace and Kara liked this about the courses. It was Kara's choice to take AP classes, but her mother expected her to take these classes. Kara describes herself as someone who always challenges herself because she's "lazy by nature." She says that being in honors and AP classes improves her work ethic. She also says that she takes honors and AP classes because they look great when applying to colleges. Kara is the only interviewee who has taken all regular and honors classes throughout her time in high school, and she is the senior class president. By her junior year, she had completed Calculus AB and Calculus BC. Kara says if she was to refer students somewhere to learn more about honors and AP classes, she would refer them to Department Coordinators or to the guidance counselor. She has never utilized these resources personally saying:

Kara: Our great course selection book and guide to Lakeland Spring I suppose but it defines the courses, but I don't know. I've never felt a need to look at courses outside of AP because I just always knew that's where I wanted to go.

Kara does clarify and say that when the guidance counselor came to the social studies class every year to do scheduling, she would schedule a one-on-one meeting with him and that she noticed other students would not. Unlike many of the interviewees for this study, Kara believes that Mr. Muncy (senior guidance counselor) is a "great" counselor.

I Learned About AP and Honors From a Teacher

Tanya remembers first learning about honors and AP in the 8th grade. The teacher her class scheduled classes with on a scheduling form informed the students that they could take honors classes if they had an “A” in specific subject areas. Tanya doesn’t recall the process of going to AP. She has a strong dislike for her classes guidance counselor.

Ana has taken honors classes since 9th grade. She first learned about honors in the 8th grade from a teacher who described regular track courses as moving at a “slower pace”. When Ana was in the 8th grade, a group of high school students in honors came to talk to some of the students about the courses. These HS students told 8th graders to avoid AP classes because they would be too difficult, but to definitely take honors because this is what colleges want to see. Ana learned about AP in the 11th grade as being a college level course. She took honors English as a junior, but later dropped the course because it was “too much”. Ana is finding that the regular track English course is too easy. When I ask Ana about the differences between her experiences in AP and regular track courses she says:

Ana: Well most AP classes is like most of the time it's majority white people. There's like might be like a little like five black people here and there well one majority of the regular classes you might have it's like opposite you might it's mostly black kids and there's like three white kids here and there.

Ana started to notice that she was one of the few Black students in her AP classes during the election of Donald Trump, when White students began to wear “Make America Great Again Hats” and openly discuss how Black people were looking for “handouts”.

Amanda has similar sentiments about the differences in representation in AP classes and says that:

Amanda: There's a lot of White kids in AP classes, which they were there like concentrated in those classes and it's all the same people. Whereas in a regular class like my African-American history people, there's...those are people I've never had classes with in high school.

Amanda says that as someone who has taken mainly AP classes throughout high school, she has mainly been in classes with White students. She has chosen to take the African American History class even though it is a regular track course because of the class material. Unlike her AP classes, Amanda feels that the African American History class is applicable to her life experiences and reality. Amanda is a senior honors and AP student who recently started the Black Student Union at LSHS. Amanda believes that the ways in which scheduling is conducted does a disservice to students:

Amanda: If I wasn't such a "I have to know about everything research oriented person" and if the people around me in the honors and AP classes weren't like that then I don't think that we would have Any idea what was going on

For students who are not as research oriented and do not have that initial contact with advanced learning as Amanda did in the Gifted program, the process can be confusing.

Lisa attended Lakeland Spring Academy (K-8 school) and learned from teachers there that honors is a "faster pace class". She remembers choosing a class schedule in 8th grade on a form

handed out to the class. Lisa chose to enter an honors reading class first because of her love of reading and wanting to work/learn to her full potential. She took honors social studies after a teacher recommended her based on her grades. Lisa is taking AP classes in order to graduate with high honors and boost her GPA. She has a sense of pride in graduating with these honors and believes the purpose of taking AP classes is to get into the top colleges. She says honors and AP courses are more racially mixed, while regular classes have more Black students.

I Learned About AP and Honors Classes From a Guidance Counselor

Michelle is in AP US History and AP English. She has taken honors classes in the past. She first learned about AP and honors classes in the 9th grade. Michelle remembers signing up for honors classes in 9th grade with a guidance counselor at school. She came from Propel, an academy school, and these options were not presented when she attended that school. Michelle's family expects her to go to college. She talks about how her mother got pregnant with her during her senior year in high school so was not able to continue her education.

Shanti says that she found out about honors and AP classes from the guidance counselor in 10th grade.

Interviewer: How did you learn about honors or advanced placement courses?

Shanti: Well our guidance counselor Mr. O' Grady he just comes in you know like the course selection. He tells us about it and if you have like a um like a B or higher in like the original class then you can get in there, but it's your choice though. Same way he just came in spoke about it and then some students were like okay, I'm gonna do it. He asked for transcripts and looked up their grades and then Yeah, he's going to give you a piece of paper if you qualify for it, he'll look

over it and then like a permission slip then your parents will sign off for you to go to an honors or AP class.

Shanti can only recall learning about honors in 8th grade and then AP later on in high school. Her understanding of getting into these classes involves the process of having the guidance counselor look at students' transcripts. Shanti talks about a teacher in 8th grade at the academy school who encouraged her to take honors classes. Shanti says that she would not personally refer anyone to the guidance office to find out about honors and AP, and instead would refer them to College Resource. Shanti has not had any good experiences with the guidance counselor. She does not really understand the differences between honors and regular with the exception of the pace at which the courses move.

Prior to starting high school and choosing classes, Tammy did not know about honors or AP classes. She started taking honors in 9th grade. Tammy first remembers learning about honors and AP during scheduling in 8th grade. The details of the process of choosing classes are a little cloudy for Tammy, but she believes her history teacher helped students choose classes (as an entire class of students) and he discussed the long-term benefits of taking honors. Tammy says that students usually pick classes for the next year in history class. She also says that the guidance counselor will come in during these sessions and encourage students to challenge themselves by taking more rigorous courses. Tammy chose to take honors and AP classes and her mother was very supportive of her. Her mother had not heard of the availability of these courses before hearing about them from Tammy. Her mother didn't attend college and wants Tammy to attend so she will have more opportunities. The purpose of taking AP classes for Tammy is to challenge herself and generally to prepare herself for college.

I Learned About AP Classes Through Scheduling

Sheyenne has never taken AP classes, but has taken honors English and history. She says that she has never taken honors math or science because she isn't "good" at these subjects. Sheyenne says that she started to feel like she wasn't good at math and science in the 8th grade because the subject areas started to get more difficult at that time. She learned about these classes in 8th grade during scheduling. One reason why Sheyenne took honors was because the students getting disciplined for behavior became a distraction to learning. Within this dialogue she says that the "ghetto" kids are in the regular classes. When she was in 8th grade one of her teachers encouraged her to take honors classes so she wouldn't be in a class with a bunch of "Jimmys", a student known for misbehaving in class.

Apryl learned about AP and honors classes during scheduling as well, and decided to challenge herself this year with an AP class. Apryl says that she saw the AP class as an option on the scheduling form for the first time at the end of her junior year. She did not know these classes were an option prior to this time. She changes her answer a few moments later and says that she did know these classes existed in the past when teachers and guidance counselors explained them. Apryl also says that her friends were taking AP and honors and told her about these classes. Her answer is a little unclear timing wise regarding when she found out about AP and honors classes. She does say that her parent had to sign off for her to take the AP European History class. Apryl's parents did not know about AP classes prior to her taking one, but they did know about honors classes.

Interviewer: So you knew about honors and AP. How and when did you first find out about it or do you think like it entered your mind like 'oh this exists' like AP and honors is an actual thing?

Apryl: Yep my junior year.

Interviewer: Okay, that's when you first found out that it even existed.

Apryl: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, and how did you find that out?

Apryl: Oh, well, my friends had took it.

Interviewer: Okay, okay

Apryl: and they told me about it and was just like hey you should try it and I was like alright. So as of right now, I like it.

Interviewer: And uh did, does your parent or Guardian know that you're taking honors?

Apryl: Yeah they had to write their little signature.

Interviewer: Okay.

Apryl: to make sure it's okay before we could take it.

Interviewer: Did they know about AP and honors before you started taking them?

Apryl: They knew about honors. They didn't know about AP. They're old.

Interviewer: Okay well (laughs) okay um, so it was your choice to take honors or AP

Apryl: AP, yeah.

While Apryl has decided to challenge herself by taking AP European History this year, she does not have a grasp of the implications that taking an AP class, the AP exam, and receiving college credits can have on her future. She found out about the possibility of taking an AP class

toward the end of her high school career and has no recollection of anyone explaining these options earlier on in the process of academic planning. When she does go to her guidance counselor regarding scheduling, she chooses the classes she wants to take and the guidance counselor approves her choices without much discussion. Additionally, her parents are not aware of the option, which further complicates the potential for options she has academically as a student. Apryl's parents and immediate family members did not go to college themselves and some stopped attending school by their junior year in high school. While her family encourages her to "keep going" and "keep doing a good job" they do not have the information she needs to advance further in her education and Apryl is setting a new and positive trend within her family. Apryl says that she and her sister will be the first individuals in her family to attend college.

No Memories of Where I Learned About AP and Honors Classes

Jackie learned about honors and AP in the 8th grade. She doesn't remember many of the details, but she does remember some teachers recommending her for honors. Rather or not Jackie took honors/AP did not really matter to her family. Jackie is currently in an honors geometry class. She is a participant in the Forbes culinary program so this impacts the courses she can or cannot take. The Forbes schedule doesn't allow for taking honors classes.

Tasha

Tasha acknowledges that she is considered to be an educated and middle-class parent, but that she did not have a great amount of information on the gifted program before that first teacher encouraged her oldest daughter to get tested. She says that she is sure that parents do not have information on these programs or on the things they can request on behalf of their children. Tasha believes that this may be why her daughters have not seen many Black students in their gifted

classes. Her experiences as a parent of students attending LSHS have shown her that the school needs cultural relevancy training for those teaching across all fields of study including STEM.

Mr. Muncy

During the interview with Mr. Muncy, I asked him about academic information being distributed to all of the students and the communities they are from in an equitable way. I wondered how students and parents who may not have the same social capital get access to information about AP classes and other academic opportunities:

Mr. Muncy: "Well, I mean we are, right there are 12 communities as you said, however, we're one community. So it's complex on that front that we're 12 communities, but we're one school base, right? And so the same data that goes to let's say wealthier communities or those same uh uh emails or um advertising the goes goes to the poor communities, you know, so so I hear what you're saying. I mean I think but um My hope is that um all people are seeing it equally."

Based on student responses and feelings regarding interactions with the guidance counselor, it is unclear whether this is actually happening. Mr. Muncy 'hopes' that information is being distributed equitably, but at this point it is not. There are factors that may contribute to this less or not such as the counselor's positionality and/or the difficulties associated with being the only guidance counselor for the senior class.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has shown the ways in which microaggressions and stereotyping, teachers' colorblindness, and inconsistent AP policies perpetuate inequality in access to AP classes for Black girls. The discussion around the process of entering AP classes brought forth an array of responses that connect to each girl's positionality as a Black girl in an educational institution in southwestern Pennsylvania. Each girl's unique experience is best understood through both Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory lenses. BFT is of necessity as this study looks at the experiences of Black girls specifically in order to look at the gendered and racialized ways in which their experiences tell a story of inequality. A CRT lens, while intersectional, allows more emphasis on the race piece of this story and brings forth the counter-stories of Black girls' accessibility to academic supports as they learn about AP classes and process.

The counter-stories presented within this study are the girls experiences with guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators in contrast to the master narrative that these adult supports perceive their positions to be within the academic institution. The senior guidance counselor, Mr. Muncy, believes that he is serving as the support he never had in high school and leans on his beliefs around "informed decisions" to assist the students at Lakeland Spring High School in making course selections. Unfortunately, he does not take the positionality of his students into consideration when assuming that they all have the same approach to making "informed decisions". During the interview he admits to "hoping" that the students and their parents receive the same information regarding AP classes and other academic opportunities without acknowledging the systemic barriers that have historically created a playing field that requires more equity than equality.

Tasha, the mother of Gabby and Mer, exemplifies resistance to systemic barriers and represents the parents who are forced to confront inequality on a daily basis in order to ensure a quality education and access for their children. The counter-stories of the girls interviewed also show resistance to the status quo as Black girls take the initiative in forming relationships with faculty as they participate in the practice of defining themselves through the self-valuation and self-definition. The girls in AP classes have learned to shape their voices and the information that comes with these voices in order to prevent the message of what they are trying to communicate from getting lost. The girls outside of AP classes show resistance as they confront microaggressions and color-blindness from teachers, yet still persist within these hostile environments. This recognition of colorblind racism within the classroom and the ways in which Black girls negotiate their interactions and reactions exemplify everyday acts of resistance at the individual level.

The girls interviewed for this study show an appreciation for the school they attend and many believe that Lakeland Spring High School is an ideal school. They almost unanimously felt that Lakeland Spring Junior Senior High School was a great school academically that offered many extra-curricular activity options. They attribute anything negative about the school to a few bad apples and believe that the school can improve. The feelings of hopefulness connected to having a new principal, Dr. Moore, who can better relate to the students experiences racially and socioeconomically is communicated through the interviews. The girls in AP and honors classes recognize that Black girls are largely underrepresented in AP classes. Existing within the school as a racialized and gendered body is where the issue presents itself, yet they persist in achieving and resisting an education system that perpetuates color-blindness and the subjugation of Black girls through stereotyping and microaggressions.

Through interviews with students, a parent, teachers, a guidance counselor, and the principal, it is clear that there is not a unified approach to gaining access to advanced placement courses. While in the past unified approaches have led to systemic oppression, it is important to acknowledge that even with a process that is not “one-size-fits-all” students are still being excluded from these advanced level courses. This is an issue of equity in the distribution of information on achievement related opportunities. Tasha, the mother of Gabby and Mer, mentions this issue as a parent who would not have known about the ins and outs of giftedness and advanced level course opportunities if it had not been for advocacy from a teacher early on. She feared that other parents and students may not be receiving this information, and it seems she was onto something. While students may be receiving some information regarding course scheduling and options from the guidance counselor, the extent to which the details of that information reach students vary.

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