A Phenomenological Study of the Students Who Were Actively Engaged in

the High Achievement Program at a Suburban High School

by
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Abstract

Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes are seen as steppingstones to

college. There is a belief that these classes are the foundation of collegiate matriculation for

students of color. In response to this pathway the High Achievement Program at a suburban high

school was created in 2005 to increase the number of Latino and African American students in

Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes and offer them academic

and social support. This phenomenological study examined the lived experience of African

American and Latino students who were actively engaged in a suburban high school's High

Achievement Program with the emergence of the following themes: (1) empowerment, (2) a

sense of belonging through racial affinity, (3) the school's culture and (4) the impact of the High

Achievement Program on their college experience. Insights gained from this study are: (1) the

participants in the study benefitted socially, emotionally and academically from the

program, (2) the participants felt affirmed and safe in groups of racial affinity, (3) being

clustered with other African Americans and Latinos in AP/IB/honors classes eliminated the

participants' feelings of isolation and hypervisibility, and (4) the participants valued the

relationship and support provided by the High Achievement Program Coordinator.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

AP Advanced Placement

HAP High Achievement Program

IB International Baccalaureate

Chapter One

Introduction

Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes are seen as steppingstones to college. There is a belief that these classes are the foundation of collegiate matriculation for all students. However, there was very little research into how students of color manage in these classes. (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2007). There was also little research on what type of in-school support is needed to help Latino and African American students to succeed and what that lived experience was for Latino and African American students.

In response to this pathway, the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school was created in 2005 to increase the number of Latino and African American students in Advanced Placement (AP)/International Baccalaureate (IB)/honors classes and to offer them academic and social support. Academic support involved tutoring, and monitoring of grades. Social support was offered through affinity group meetings and by assigning an advocate. An affinity group is "a group of people who share a common interest, background or goal" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2011). The High Achievement Program students share a Latino or African American background and a commonality in taking AP/IB/honors classes. That focus is still in place with additional features, however the participation numbers have soared, since the inception of the program when there were two Latino and/or African American students taking AP/IB classes. At the time of this study, this school had 137 Latino and African American students taking 322 Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate /honors classes. Twenty-nine and half percent of African American students and 39% of the Latino students were enrolled in these classes. African American students made up 24.3% of the student population and Latino students made up 8.3% (Suburban High School's PowerSchool, 2014-15). The objective was to

help students succeed in those classes. The students were offered support by visiting college campuses, both private and public institutions, attending educational conferences, daily interaction with their advocate, grade level group meetings, participating in study groups, monitoring of their grades, goal setting, and collaborating with their counselors and teachers.

In 2013 the Broad Foundation, a national foundation that focuses on urban schools and has invested $600 million since 1999 to improve student achievement, outlined steps to increase AP access for underrepresented populations in their expanding AP access report. The Broad Foundation suggested that there should be an appointed district-wide advocate for the expansion of AP access. The Foundation also suggested that the school design academic supports to ensure the success of the students. Those supports could be tutoring sessions, extended instruction, summer school and test preparation sessions.

The College Board (2013) believes that the racial demographics of one's school should reflect the racial demographics of the students enrolled in AP classes. Not only should the classes reflect the racial demographics, but also supports need to be in place in order to ensure the success of non-white students in the AP classes and on the exams. The College Board has various initiatives for schools to support students who are underrepresented in AP classes. The initiative that aligns with the researcher's work is the National AP Equity Colloquium. It is an annual event bringing together educators from across the country to discuss challenges and solutions for expanding access and increasing equity in AP. Session topics include preparing, recruiting and retaining traditionally underrepresented students in AP (College Board 4th Annual Report to the Nation, 2008). Black and brown students are routinely denied access to the advantages of educational opportunity (Irvine, 1991) and that denial is more prevalent in AP classes (Ford, 2011).

Therefore, the researcher examined the lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school in order to generate an awareness of the components of support that the graduates felt were most valuable.

Statement of the Problem and Its Significance

The "achievement gap" in education pertains to the variation in academic performance between student groups, mainly Latino and African American students in comparison to non-Latino white students. That variation places the achievement of the average African American and Latino student at approximately the same ranking as the average white student in the bottom quartile (Education Commission of the States, 2015). The National Center for Educational Statistics NCES (2013) interpreted, "the achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant" (p. 210). Although, the NCES simplified it to "one group outperforming another group," the gap in achievement is generally between white and nonwhite students (National Research Council, 2004). That gap shows up in grades, standardized test scores, course choices and graduation rates (Education Week, July 7, 2011). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2013), the gap has widened over the years, stating that "the White-Black score gap in reading was wider in 2013 than in 1992. In math and reading, White students scored higher on average than black and Hispanic students in 2013" (p. 1). Not only do those gaps exist, but also according to the College Board's 4th Annual AP Report to the Nation (2008), even though the number of African American and Latino students in Advanced Placement classes is increasing and they are encountering success, equity and excellence gaps continue to exist. Ford (2011) argued that there are not enough studies focused on closing the achievement gap of high achieving black and brown students. The researcher wanted to emphasize that the "achievement

gap" goes beyond social class. Yet, inside the same institutions of learning black students from middle class families have test scores that are lower than that of white students (Williams, 2003). Therefore, the achievement gap appears with high achieving black and brown students, and it does not discriminate economically.

A U.S. Department of Education study gathered that African American and Latino students are three times more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree if they make an effort to take an AP class in high school (Adelman, 2006). Research done by Martinez and Klopott (2005) suggested a similar correlation between AP classes and postsecondary success.

Some studies purported that there is an opportunity gap for African American and Latino students regarding access to AP classes. Opportunity and achievement are linked but are different. Although all African American and Latino students will not matriculate to college, the opportunity to be prepared for college should not elude them. The opportunity gap occurs when African American and Latino students have less accomplished teachers and less rigorous classes than their White peers. The opportunity gap negatively impacts student achievement and future productivity as a contributing member of society. The more educated an individual is, the greater the likelihood of that individual not relying on social services in the future (Carter & Welner, 2013).

African American and Latino student enrollment in AP classes is less than that of white students (College Board, 2013). Many minority and low-income students miss out on the benefits associated with AP and honors courses in high school, because of the underrepresentation in "gifted" education programs (Tyson, 2008). Whiting and Ford (2009) suggested the underrepresentation is due to teachers' and counselors' minimal referrals for black students. However, when they are in the AP classes, there is an atmosphere of alienation, because they

14

tend to be one of a handful of nonwhite students in the class (Carter, 2008; Ford, 1996; Saunders & Maloney, 2015).

All types of diversity within urban areas require the creation of scholastic environments that respond to the differing academic and social needs of the student population (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2007).

Nationally, only 33% or less of African American and Latino students are enrolled in college preparatory classes compared to 50% or more of their Asian and white peers (Carter & Welner, 2013). Black students are routinely denied access to the advantages of educational opportunity (Irvine, 1991). However, that denial is more prevalent in AP classes (Ford, 2011).

Most attempts in gifted education are centered on identifying and recruiting African American and Latino students for gifted and Advanced Placement programs. According to an article by Daniel Rodriguez (2015) the College Board has a campaign called "All In" to encourage more Latino students to enroll in AP classes.

Seldom has the focus been on retaining African American students in those classes (Ford, 2011). Ford suggested that black students need supports to be successful in these classes. Whiting (2009) and Ford (2009) offered recommendations to retain black students in AP classes. One recommendation was for mentoring support. The mentors would be advocates for the students and encourage the students to advocate for themselves. Another component of the mentoring recommendation was simultaneous assistance in the areas of study skills and test-taking aptitude. While there was a plethora of studies conducted on the deficits of African American students, there were few studies about the needs and aspirations of those who were high achievers (Freeman, 1999). The mentoring recommendations of Whiting (2009) and Ford

(2009), and the lack of research on the needs of high achieving African American students supported the significance of the researcher's study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to seek a deeper understanding of why the students actively engaged in the High Achievement Program stayed in the program, and a deeper understanding of the success of the program that gave voice to what students were experiencing. Because the nature of the study was phenomenological, the researcher was able to delve deeper into the student experience of those who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program.

Historical Background of the High Achievement Program

The High Achievement Program at the suburban high school was implemented during the 2005-2006 school year. This high school received a grant from the Minnesota Department of Education to establish the High Achievement Program. The initial intent of the High Achievement Program was to increase the number of underrepresented populations of students taking Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes.

In 2005, this suburban high school had 1,400 students, with 30%, or approximately 400 students from minority groups. There were 18% African Americans, 6% Hispanics, 5% Pacific Islanders and 1% Native American students (Suburban High School Enrollment Summary, 2005). Fifty-five percent of the 2005 graduating class took one or more honors courses before graduation, but less than 1% of the minority students were enrolled in AP/IB/honors classes. The school has undertaken a number of strategies to change that cultural norm, including inviting minority students to enroll in honors (AP/IB) courses and had made no progress prior to the implementation of the High Achievement Program (HAP) in 2005-06.

16

HAP was a strategy to counter the nationwide trend in which the number of Latino and African American students taking honors courses was not keeping pace with students overall. In the first year of the program (2005-06) at this high school, eight students took 16 honors classes with a passing rate of 100%. The numbers continued to increase every year. The numbers went from eight students taking 16 AP/IB/honors classes in 2005-2006, to an average of 137 African American and Latino students taking 322 AP/IB/honors classes with an average passing rate of 94% in 2015 at the time of this study.

Because there was little research on what type of in-school support was needed to help Latino and African American students to succeed and what that lived experience was for these students, the researcher sought a deeper understanding of the experience of those students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The implementation of the High Achievement Program at this suburban high school occurred during the 2005-2006 school year. In its historical context, the purpose of the High Achievement Program was to increase the underrepresentation of Latino and African American students in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes. The original purpose had been added to the current purpose of offering academic and social support for the High Achievement Program students.

Because the program was designed to serve African American and Latino students who take Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes, the researcher examined literature that was specific to those two populations. The researcher divided this literature review into four categories: the racial achievement gap, opportunity gap, race and culture, and school culture. The researcher examined what impact those four categories had on the specified student population.

According to the College Board (2014), despite significant progress, African American, and Hispanic/Latino students who showed AP potential through other standardized tests like the PSAT still typically enrolled in AP classes at lower rates than white students. The achievement gap was still prevalent for Latino and African American students and it even existed for high achieving African American students. Researching the lived experience of the Latino and African American students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program provided a deeper understanding of the impact that intentional academic and social support has on African American and Latino students for other schools and districts.

The Racial Achievement Gap

Paige and Witty (2010) purported that the achievement gap is the greatest civil rights concern of our time. In spite of the assurance of equal educational opportunities for all students, the educational system in the United States has failed African American and Latino students in such a way that they are not achieving on the same level as their white peers. These differences in academic performance, known as the achievement gap, have serious implications for the future life opportunities of students and for our society. The racial disparity in achievement has serious ramifications for the future of our society and the lives of black and Latino students. Elementary school students with low skills become middle school students with low skills and then high school students with a slim chance of succeeding in and beyond high school. The results of failing them are catastrophic: poverty and incarceration. Thus, the achievement gap in education is America's social problem (Achievement First, 2016).

Although, in education the "achievement gap" involves the disparity in the levels of achievement between various racial groups of students, mainly black and Latino students and their white peers. The widespread societal meaning of the achievement gap relates to the disparity in standardized test scores and graduation rates between blacks and whites, Hispanics/Latinos and whites. However, some even argued that it is not an achievement gap, because that places the responsibility on the students, but it is an opportunity gap. The opportunity gap is the disparity in access to resources such as health, housing, safety and enriching experiences (Carter & Welner, 2013). Carter and Welner (2013) believed that the national conversation has been so focused on the gap in achievement that the opportunity gap has been left out of the discourse. They felt that the opportunity gap places the emphasis on causes and the focusing on the "achievement gap" places too much attention on the symptoms. Carter

and Welner (2013) concluded that inadequate access to opportunities for Latino and black students has not been given the attention it deserves. However, for the purposes of this study, the researcher used the widespread accepted term, "achievement gap."

Myth of Inferiority

There are many purported reasons for the failure rates of African American children in the United States. Some of those reasons are attributed to the education level of the parents, racial and cultural composition of the students, socioeconomic status, the accessibility to high quality preschool, belief systems of teachers and the quality of curriculum and instruction (Education Commission on the States, 2015). However, one reason is rarely verbalized, but is ingrained in the American fabric. That reason is that black children are intellectually inferior – less capable than their white counterparts (Delpit, 2012).

That unspoken assumption of inferiority of black and brown students is prevalent when the comparison of achievement with white students is examined. Black and brown children are compared to white students in terms of achievement with white students' performance is used as the standard. Nasir (2011) did not accept that comparison. He did not see African American students as less capable. In his book *Racialized Identities,* he challenged the view that African American students are not as intelligent as white students or "not culturally prepared for achievement" (p. 8). Nasir focused on how identity plays out in schools and how that identity influences achievement. Kuykendall (2004) mimicked Delpit's (2012) and Nasir's (2011) views regarding the unspoken assumption of inferiority. Kuykendall (2004) believed that blacks and Latinos are perceived as inferior and nonindustrious when compared to white students.

Delpit (2012) suggested when we make the assumptions of inferiority, teachers will teach to that assumption. They will not give their very best of instruction, which in turn perpetuates the

gap in achievement. Noguero, Pierce and Ahram (2016) found that Latino students were held to much lower expectations by white teachers than their white peers. The assumption was that they were less capable than their white peers. They were often tracked lower level classes. Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu (2012) suggested that there is not anything wrong with black children. They are not intellectually inferior. He believed that they need to be placed in schools that are academically challenging. Those environments will bring out the best in black and brown students. They will meet or surpass the highest of expectations.

Carter G. Woodson (1933) wrote a thesis on the detrimental impact of indoctrinating black children to believe that they are inferior. Once you control a person's thoughts, you do not have to be concerned with that person's behavior. If you can cause a person to feel inferior, then you will not have to convince him to accept that label, because he will internalize it himself. If you cause a person to believe that he is deservedly an outsider, then you do not have to tell him to use a back door. He will undoubtedly use it and if there is not a back door, then he will manufacture one (Woodson, 2005). The author and educator Eric Mahmoud (2013) argued that this belief is still prevalent. Eric refers to this as the "belief gap." That belief gap is reflective in the low expectations held for black and brown children in the United States, believing that they are innately less intelligent, thus, incapable of achieving at high levels.

Although Nasir (2011) did not accept the master narrative of comparing white students with the achievement of black students, that narrative is prevalent. The constancy of the achievement gap between black and white students in grades Kindergarten through 12 is cause for concern among those who researcher and analyze social policy. The gap is especially troublesome because of its presence in continued social and economic inequality in the United States (Williams, 2003). Eric Mahmoud (2013) illuminated that inequality. There are very few

options for students who are not successful in our learning institutions. They will probably live in poverty, be jailed or become recipients of government assistance (p. 35). One important aspect of the gap that more researchers are starting to acknowledge is that the achievement gap goes beyond socio-economic status. Yet, inside the same institutions of learning black students from middle class families have test scores that are lower than that of white students (Williams, 2003). Due to that transcendence of socio-economic status, race is a factor when focusing attention on the achievement gap. Schools need to examine their practices and look for biases that may be preventing African American and Latino students from achieving at high levels (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Those biases can transform into practices that reflect institutional racism. Singleton and Linton (2006) believed that institutionalize racism is a detrimentally contributing factor to the racial achievement gap. They defined institutional racism as the silence that exists in our educational system regarding racial biases and the white privilege that prevails.

Most schools will have the following statement somewhere in their literature, "all students can learn." The authors of *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap* wrote "all students must learn" (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2003). Kay Lovelace Taylor (2004) reminds educators that all students are not learning. However, she attributed it to the racial prejudice, which is widely ignored. She felt that educators need to act as if all children can achieve or just do not say it all.

The students served through the High Achievement Program make up the demographics that are part of the gap, Latino and African American students. However, they are achieving at high levels. What makes these students the exception, rather than the rule? Boykin and Noguera (2011) referenced Schunk and Zimmerman's (2007) research on self-regulated learning. "Self-regulated learning or self-regulation is defined as self- generated thoughts, feelings and actions

that are systematically designed to affect one's knowledge and skills" (p.55). They go on to reference Pintrich (2003), who expanded on the idea of self-regulation as a student's ability to set goals for herself or himself, as well as monitor her or his learning and actions.

Because the racial achievement gap is seen as a civil rights issue (Paige and Witty, 2010), it is incumbent upon African American and Latino leaders to take the helm and do more to close the racial achievement gap. Not enough African American leaders are accepting the responsibility to combat this gap. African American leaders need to look to themselves for solutions. They have three recommendations to close the gap:

(1) African American leaders must acknowledge that school, home and community in combination impact achievement and therefore, cannot be addressed in isolation.

(2) African American leaders need to believe that socioeconomic status or zip code does not determine a child's level of academic success. They need to hold fast to the belief that all children can learn.

(3) African American leaders have to be the ones to solve this problem.

Patricia Gandara (2008) suggested that schools develop programs that strengthen the identities of Latino students. She referenced the High School Puente program in California centers on Latino students. The students meet for one hour on a daily basis with a scholarly mentor from the Latino community. That meeting consists of intense instruction in writing and Latino literature. The program also offers experiences outside the classroom that allow the students to support each other racially and academically.

Opportunity Gap

America is commonly referred to as the land of opportunity. That opportunity is not predicated upon a child's pedigree. However, the reality of that opportunity is not equal. There are segments of students who encounter barriers to that opportunity based upon their race and economic status. Those barriers cause a lack of opportunity or gap in opportunity. Those barriers can show in inadequate access to affordable housing, quality early childhood education, and other resources that afforded to more privileged students (Carter & Welner, 2013).

The opportunity gap moves the focus from the achievement gap to the social and educational gap in opportunities (Da Silva, Huguley, Kakli & Rao, 2007). Some experts believed that 65% of the achievement is attributed to the opportunity gap (Anderson, 2011). The opportunity gap can also be referred to as the "lack of opportunity" gap. Privileged families can provide many opportunities for learning for their children. Those opportunities involve conversations during meal times, extra tutoring, extracurricular activities during the school and the summer and globetrotting. The opportunity gap has no correlation to a dearth of effort on the part of students, but substantial distinctions in how they are nurtured and educational opportunities that are afforded more privileged families in comparison to families that are struggling to just meet their basic needs. Anderson (2011) believed that the achievement gap will not be closed until the opportunity gap is closed. He believed that both are interconnected.

Race and Culture

Our culture chronicles how we live, daily, in terms of our language, ancestry, religion, food, dress, musical tastes, traditions, values. Largely, race is meaning attached to the melanin content found in the skin, hair, and eyes. Those who are abounding in melanin are said to be 'of color' (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

There was some debate regarding the meaning of race. It was very interesting how various authors interpreted the meaning of race. Nasir (2011) categorized race as a lived and experiential part of one's self. Cultural behaviors are reflective of one's racial identity. Race becomes racial through conversation and socializing. Pollock (2008) and Hollie (2012) had antithetical views of race. Sharroky Hollie (2012) wrote, "Our racial identity is very clear: it is the biological DNA representation that gives us our blood lineage and, for example, what diseases we may be prone to. Other than that, racial identity really tells us nothing about who we are as individuals (p.32). Hollie believed that cultural identity defines who we are. Whereas, in *Everyday Antiracism*, Pollock (2008) wrote, "Teach students why race is an obsolete biological concept" (p.3). Some experts believed that race is purely biological and some believed that race is purely social (Tatum, 2003). Dr. Mahmoud El-Kati would argue that race is not biological, but a construct that is manmade. He believed that race is a fallacy (Hawkins, 2012). He suggested that race was created as a form of oppression. Lipsitz (2006) would agree with El-Kati regarding the non-biological nature of race. He suggested that some scholars suggest that race is a socially constructed political category.

Singleton and Linton (2006) believed that it is difficult for people of color to separate race from culture, because they view the two as one or equivalent. For the purpose of this research the researcher defined race as skin color and culture as behaviors that reflect our racial identity. Whatever the consensus, until there is not a box to check on an application or any other form, the social construction of race is very real in our society, and the High Achievement Program's students had to navigate its ramifications on a daily basis.

No one would argue that knowing your students is key to facilitating their success. The development of a relationship with students is a key function of being a teacher (Borrero & Bird,

2009). However, researchers in the field of cultural relevancy and competency would argue that it goes beyond that. One needs to understand and value the culture of students. If elevating achievement levels of our students is important, then knowing their culture has to play a role. We also need to highlight the assets that students possess (Tileston & Darling, 2008). Others argue more simply, culture matters (Lindsey, Roberts & CampbellJones, 2005).

Culture can be described as the manner in which life is arranged within a distinguishable community of people (Villegas & Lucas, 2007) or the totality of everything that someone learns by growing up in a specific setting (Davis, 2012). How that life is arranged can vary by gender, age, ethnicity, religion and nationality. There is a home culture and a mainstream culture. African American and Latino students navigate their home culture and mainstream culture. One's culture is what a person knows and anything outside one's culture is foreign; therefore, it is viewed as deficient. (Clayton, 2003). Behaviors and norms that are acceptable at home may not be acceptable outside the home. For example, if students "over talk" one another at home, that behavior would be frowned upon in another setting, such as in a classroom.

School Culture

Every school consists of a culture, but schools that are successful appear to have secure, functioning cultures associated with a plan for a high standard of education. Culture acts as a guide to move a community in the same direction; it offers a model that defines what and how people should achieve, and it is an origin of significance for the school's community as they work together (Sergiovanni, 1987).

If culture reflects how we act on a daily basis, then school culture would have to reflect how we act within the confines of the school's setting. School culture sets the norms and expectations of the school. School culture is multifarious with a system of beliefs, customs,

26

procedures and principles (Muhammad & Hollie, 2012). In an article about school culture and change, Hinde (2002) agreed with Muhammad and Hollie (2012), but she also added that school culture develops as the school's population interacts with each other; therefore, school culture is dynamic.

Hollins (1996) suggested that schools mimic society as a whole. Whatever is important to the community at large will be important within the school. If valuing all the cultures is important to the community at large, then valuing all cultures will be important within the school, too.

An important component of constructing an atmosphere where talents and gifts are cultivated in students from different backgrounds is an earnest belief that all students can achieve at high levels accompanied with instructional and mass assistance (Kyburg et al., 2007). Kafele (2013) believed that the school's environment can impact the attitude of the students. The school's environment is a determinant of student success. Teachers need to believe that black and Latino students can and will excel. That belief is manifested in daily interaction and instruction. Mahmoud (2013) argued that we need to provide positive messages about African American and Latino students in order to counter the narrative in society that spews negative information.

What the staff believes about its students is linked to how they interact with students. That belief system is reflective of the school's environment. A staff that believes the students can achieve will position their actions to make sure that achievement occurs. The environment that fosters high academic achievement will have teachers who have high expectations for all students. Relationships with students are important, but beyond building relationships, teachers know their students. Teachers are skilled in instructional practices that lead to student

achievement (Muhammed & Hollie, 2012). Kunjufu (2012) suggested that those instructional

practices have an impact, particularly on the achievement levels of black students, as well as

other students of color, when the teacher balances pedagogy with how the students learn.

Mahmoud (2013) believed that those instructional practices must include cognitive (problem

solving) and affective strategies. Affective strategies help students manage their emotions.

Affinity Groups

Affinity groups can foster a positive learning environment for black and Latino students.

"An affinity group is a group of people who share interests, issues, and a common bond or

background, and offer support for each other" (Bernard Hopes Group, 2004). Students in the

High Achievement Program are clustered based upon race and academic levels. Racial grouping

of students based on academic and social needs can be helpful combatting the feelings of

marginalization of black and Latino students. Gandara (2008) referred to this process as

"cocooning." Cocooning allows the students of color to establish an identity in a nonthreatening

environment. Gandara (2008) suggested that racial groupings are critical, because these students

share experiential commonalities.

Being a student of color in a predominantly white school can be a challenge wherein an

affinity group can provide a sphere of safety, emotional and psychological safety. It is a type of

safety that allows them to be authentic without fear of being judged by their white peers and/or

teachers. That sphere of safety provides an opportunity for students of color to discuss the

isolation that they feel. The relationships that are built through race-based affinity groups provide

a space where feelings can be shared and self-esteem boosted. Schools benefit from affinity

groups. Schools can get strategies that they can employ to enhance the school's overall culture

and to nurture racial identity development (Parsons & Ridley, 2012).

Affinity groups affirm students' identities while equipping them to find their place within the school's community. Realizing the importance of the sense of community brought by affinity groups, in 2004 Gordon School in Rhode Island developed race based affinity groups for the adults in their community: teachers of color and parents of color. The children of these two groups looked forward to the meetings, because they were able to be with their friends. The school took note of this and created a task force to research student affinity groups. Their research found that students of color were isolated in some classrooms. They had students at the middle level who were requesting affinity group meetings. When students of color needed support, they seek the assistance of the staff of color.

Two years later, in 2006, Gordon established race based affinity groups for grades one to four (Parsons & Ridley, 2012). The desired outcome was that the students would feel empowered and view their racial identity as an asset.

Being able to interact with other racial groups, Latino and black students need to develop strong identities of their own first. Their strong identities prevent them from taking on the negative stereotypes that are associated with their racial group. Their strong identities help them to succeed academically and socially (Gandara, 2008).

Giftedness

The label of gifted is associated with a positive attitude for students of color. They see themselves as intelligent and are therefore, more apt to enrolled in AP classes in high school. Unfortunately, far too many African American and Latino students are not significantly represented in gifted programs. This underrepresentation can leave students of color believing that AP classes are for white students and not for them (Tyson, 2008). Educators need to examine their attitudes toward what giftedness represents. Their biases can impact the beliefs

that African American and Latino students hold for themselves. One option that Tyson (2008) suggested is to eliminate gifted programs and offer rigorous classes to all students. If the elimination of the gifted programs is not plausible, then she suggested that schools look at who is taking rigorous classes. It needs to be looked at by race. Being colorblind when it comes to looking at who is taking challenging classes is not recommended. Tyson (2008) believed that taking a colorblind approach has led to the underrepresentation of African American and Latino students in these classes (Pollock, 2008).

There are schools in Minnesota that mandate all students to take AP U.S. history in 10th grade. They recognized how underrepresented students of color were in their AP classes and they were not pleased with it. They wanted every student to have the challenge of an AP class (Regan, 2014). Schools in Minnesota have adopted what Tyson (2008) suggested and have taken into account by race those who are represented in their AP classes.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Cultural proficient schools have cultural competent teachers who teach in a culturally responsive manner. Lindsey, Roberts and CampbellJones (2005) defined cultural proficiency as celebrating the diversity that cultures offer, and respecting and understanding all cultural entities. Cultural competence is connecting with other cultural groups in a manner that honors their diversity and causes individuals to examine their own beliefs. In examining one's own beliefs, the individual becomes more adaptive in how he relates to other cultures and what resources may be needed to expand his knowledge (Lindsey, Roberts & CampbellJones, 2005). In the *Diversity Toolkit*, the NEA (2017) provided a simplified definition of cultural competence. It's defined as "ability to successfully teach students who come from a culture or cultures other than one's own (p.1).

Culturally responsive teaching can be viewed as utilizing the cultural understanding, background knowledge, behavior styles of racially diverse students to make their learning meaningful and successful for them (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching supports the validity of the cultural lineages of the students. It connects schools and families in a meaningful way because their differences are celebrated and valued. Seeing themselves in the curriculum validates racially diverse students' heritage and when negative stereotypes surface, teachers will address those stereotypes through sensitive discussions with the class (Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2004). Ladson-Billings (1992) suggested that teachers who teach in a culturally responsive manner teach to all aspects of the child. They teach to the emotional, social and intellectual elements of the student.

Summary

.   The researcher reviewed literature regarding the racial achievement gap, opportunity gap, race and culture and school culture while also examining affinity groups, giftedness and culturally responsive pedagogy. The literature reviewed provided the researcher with multiple perspectives and studies of the growing concern of racial disparities for Latino and African American students, as well as the underrepresentation of Latino and African American students in advanced classes. However, additional research through interviews was sought to determine the impact of the High Achievement Program on the students who were actively engaged in the program.

Based upon the reviewed literature, there are few studies on how to support Latino and African American students in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and honors classes, particularly programs like the High Achievement Program. The minimal number of studies in existence supported the need for this study.

Chapter Three

Procedures and Research Design

Introduction

"Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience. Phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a philosophy or *theory of the unique;* it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable. Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. So phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 7).

The primary charge of phenomenological research is a vivid depiction of basic meaning forms of lived experience. Phenomenology stresses the "what" and the "how." Unlike standard forms of research, phenomenology does not just present a problem to be resolved or a question to be answered. According to Van Manen (2014), a good phenomenological study always begins with wonder or matriculates through the process of wonder. This type of wonder is not synonymous with awe or amazement. This wonder is much more profound. This wonder moves us to inquire more.

The researcher chose this method because phenomenology demonstrates how meaning uncovers itself and it does not construct an ideology or a core of knowledge. It forces the researcher to engage in "reflective practice for generating insights and pathic understandings that radically challenge established assumptions" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 62). The researcher believed that a phenomenological study enabled her to examine the conditions and assumptions of the lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program.

The lived experience is the root of phenomenological research. Data in a phenomenological study is not the same as data collected in a quantitative study. The data in a phenomenology is not quantifiable (Van Manen, 1990). The data is human experiences. The data is collected from interviews or stories that the students want to share. The researcher chose interviews as a method of her investigation, because interviews serve a distinct purpose for examining and collecting experiential accounts that may serve as a resource for phenomenological thoughts and hence, create a fuller understanding of a human phenomenon (Van Manen, 2014). The researcher's goal was to examine the lived experience of students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school, therefore, the interview method of collecting data allowed the researcher to get as close to that lived experience as possible. After the data was collected the researcher searched for themes that connected the experiences of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program.

Background Information

In this phenomenological study, the researcher examined the lived experiences of the students who were served through the High Achievement Program. The High Achievement Program at a suburban high school was implemented during the 2005-2006 school year. This high school received a grant from the Minnesota Department of Education to establish the High Achievement Program. The initial intent of the High Achievement Program was to increase the number of underrepresented populations of students taking Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and honors classes.

HAP was a strategy at the suburban school district to counter the nationwide trend in which the number of Latino and African American students taking honors courses was not

keeping pace with students overall. The first year of the program (2005-06) at this high school, eight students took 16 honors classes with a passing rate of 100%. The numbers continued to increase every year. The numbers went from eight students taking 16 AP/IB/honors classes in 2005-2006 to an average of 137 black and Latino students taking 332 AP/IB/honors classes with an average passing rate of 94% in 2014-2015. Although the program was designed to support Latino/African American students, the students still had a choice whether or not to accept the support offered by the High Achievement Program. The coordinator gathered yearly data on the two populations and reported it to the principal and superintendent, even if, not all received services from the coordinator.

The High Achievement Program was designed as part of a grant, with components from the Minnesota Rules (2007) parts 3535.0100 to 3535.0180 as the foundation. The purpose of parts 3535.0100 to 3535.0180 is to:

A. recognize that the primary goal of public education is to enable all students to have opportunities to achieve academic success;

B. reaffirm the state of Minnesota's commitment to the importance of integration in its public schools;

C. recognize that while there are societal benefits from schools that are racially balanced, there are many factors which can impact the ability of school districts to provide racially balanced schools, including housing, jobs, and transportation;

D. recognize that providing parents a choice regarding where their children should attend school is an important component of Minnesota's education policy;

E. recognize that there are parents for whom having their children attend integrated schools is an essential component of their children's education;

F. prevent segregation, as defined in part 3535.0110, subpart 9, in public schools;

G. encourage districts to provide opportunities for students to attend schools that are racially balanced when compared to other schools within the district;

H. provide a system that identifies the presence of racially isolated districts and encourage adjoining districts to work cooperatively to improve cross-district integration, while giving parents and students meaningful choices; and

I. work with rules that address academic achievement, including graduation standards under chapter 3501 and inclusive education under part 3500.0550, by providing equitable access to resources."

- Students are identified for honors course work by staff and parents as well as self-refer. Students are invited to participate in the advanced/honors classes and also are informed about the High Achievement Program (HAP) Program.

- Cohorts of minority students are placed in the same class. The belief is if groups of minority students are placed together, they will have greater comfort in the class and the possibility of success will be higher. There are a number of advantages to having a cohort together, including participation in class discussions, sharing notes, seeing others of the same race, etc.

- A weekly session for the minority honors students in advanced/honors course work is facilitated at the high school and consultants are used. The session occurs during the lunch hour -lunch should be provided. Each student discusses academic and social challenges that are occurring in honors classes. Strategies are shared, mentoring is offered, and information is continually provided to the school administration regarding issues and potential solutions.

- Tutoring is available three days/week after school specific for the minority honors students. Tutors are hired that are best equipped to service minority honors students. Extra tutoring is provided based on need (i.e. finals, etc.).

- Staff training on cultural sensitivity is facilitated to a limited number of staff. The staff is selected, based on classes they teach, their roles, as counselors and where the cohorts of minority students are placed and services are needed.

- Technology is provided to students in need.

- Prominent people of color such as Chief Justice Alan Page and Olympian Jean Carls meet with students and share their experiences.

- Staff and advisors for extra or co-curricular activities are provided diversity-training opportunities.

- A parent advisory for students from racially or ethnically identifiable groups was recently established called PASS (Parents for Academically Successful Students). This group is parent-facilitated and is a filter for the district equity plan. This parent group reviewed all the African American district student data and worked with the administration to plan a summer remedial math program.

- A boys' and girls' group for African American Students and a girls' Latina group have been established. Twenty-five boys participate in the "Boys to Men" group (African American boys), 55 girls participate in the African American girl's groups and 10 Latina girls participate in their group (Magnet Grant Application Narrative).

Many of the original components have changed or become separate from the High Achievement Program, because the original components were required for the grant's approval. After the grant expired, the district had to decide which components it wanted to

allocate resources toward sustaining. It was difficult to maintain all the components due to lack of financial resources and personnel. The following components were adopted by the District:

- Students are still self-selected, referred or recruited to enroll in AP/IB/honors classes.

- Grouping students in the AP/IB/honors classes continues to occur, but not with fidelity.

- Group meetings by grade level led by the High Achievement Program coordinator/advocate are held on a biweekly to monthly basis. The meetings depend upon other activities organized by the HAP coordinator. When students attend college visits or educational conferences, then the group meeting is not held. The coordinator wants to disrupt the class attendance as little as possible.

- There is no tutoring schedule. The HAP coordinator leads study sessions for students during their study hall periods, as well as weekends.

- Staff training on cultural sensitivity is not geared specifically for the HAP students or a small number of teachers. All staff in the district is trained in cultural sensitivity.

- The fall of 2013 a pilot program was started for 16 HAP students with limited or no computer access. They have been provided Chrome books to use for the school year. The HAP students were surveyed and 16 needed computers.

- The exposure to prominent people has broadened.

- There is no longer a Parents for Academically Successful Students' (PASS) group at the high school.

- The Latino boys' and girls' group and the African American boys' and girls' groups are not a part of HAP. They are stand-alone groups run by other staff members.

The following table represents the results from the 2014-2015 school year, 10 years after the inception of the High Achievement Program. The information was pulled from PowerSchool on the high school's website.

Table 1

First Semester – 2014-2015 Black Students in AP/IB/Honors

Grade	# of students	# of classes	# of F's	Passing Rate
12	41	90	2	98%
11	25	54	2	96%
10	21	44	5	89%
9	10	32	0	100%
Total	97	220	9	96%

First Semester – 2014-2015 Latino/Hispanic Students in AP/IB/Honors

Grade	# of Students	# of Classes	# of F's	Passing Rate
Seniors	17	53	3	94%
Juniors	10	25	1	96%
Sophomores	8	19	1	96%
Freshmen	7	23	0	100%
Total	42	120	5	96%

Combined Subgroups

Grade	# of Students	# of Classes	# of F's	Passing Rate
All	139	340	14	96%

Table 2

Second Semester – 2014 – 2015 Black Students in AP/IB/Honors

Grade	# of students	# of classes	# of F's	Passing Rate
12	38	86	10	88%
11	22	46	2	96%
10	20	39	2	95%
9	14	36	1	97%
Total	94	207	15	93%

Second Semester – 2014-2015 Hispanic Students in AP/IB/Honors

Grade	# Students	# Classes	# F's	Passing Rate
12	16	48	3	94%
11	11	25	1	96%
10	9	19	1	95%
9	7	23	0	100%
Total	43	115	5	96%

Combined Subgroups

Grade	# of students	# of classes	# of F's	Passing Rate
All	137	322	20	94%

Research Question

What was the lived experience of the students who are actively engaged in the High Achievement Program?

Purpose

Phenomenology contains a methodical structure that has six components:

- Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;

- Investigating experience as we live it rather as we conceptualize it;

- Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;

- Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;

- Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;

- Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (Van Manen, 1990).

These components applied to this study in several ways. The lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program is an experience about which other entities, such as school districts and local colleges have shown serious interest. Therefore, investigating the experience as the students have lived it provided insights that could be further researched by others. Reflecting on the themes allowed the researcher to generate characteristics that were common to the students' lived experience. By describing the lived experience through writing and rewriting, the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the educational connection to the lived experience, as well as, a balance between the individual student and the group of students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program.

Researching the lived experience of the Latino and African American students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program provided a deeper understanding of the impact that intentional academic and social support has on African American and Latino students

for other schools and districts. The researcher's purpose was to understand the meaning of the experience. The findings could guide further research of similar programs that serve high achieving Latino and African American students. Furthermore, the findings should give insights and considerations to strategies that have supported learning for Latino and African American students in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and/or honors classes. The major question was "What was the lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program?" Some secondary questions included the following: What are the social barriers that they encounter? Are there any factors that prevent Latino and African American students from taking Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate courses at St. Louis Park High School? What impact did being a part of a racial affinity group have on your lived experience?

Phenomenological Design

The participants are Latino and/or African American students. The researcher chose 19 graduates of the program to interview. The participants were not random because phenomenology is not concerned with random sampling. The nature of the design was around people with a shared experience. As the researcher continued with the phenomenological design, she defined "actively engaged" as students who participated in at least three group meetings per semester, spent an average of three periods (study hall or lunch) per week in the High Achievement Program office and participated in at least three college visits per school year.

The method of interviewing was face-to-face. The researcher met with the participants in a setting that was most comfortable for the students, such as a local library, the researcher's office and coffee shops in order to interview them. The researcher's goal was to have as many face-to-face interviews as possible, and that goal was achieved.

Interview Process

Prior to collecting data from the interviewees, the researcher set aside her beliefs about the lived experience of the High Achievement Program by interviewing herself. The researcher did not want her beliefs to bias the interviews; therefore, the researcher needed to ask herself the same questions that she asked the participants. By interviewing herself, the researcher got inside the experience. By submerging herself in the experience, the researcher understood what she felt and believed with the hope of not allowing those feelings and beliefs to influence her research. Moustakas (1994) referred to this as epoche. The epoche process allowed the researcher to be more receptive. The researcher was able to listen intently without skewing the participants' conversations with her own thinking or feelings. "Epoche is the freedom from suppositions" (p.102).

Phenomenology centers on questioning, keeping in mind that insights surface in the method more as questioning than answering, realizing that insights come to us in the mode of introspection and being consumed with the essence of the lived experience (Van Manen, 2014). Therefore, the researcher started with a general question rather than specific questions. Specific questions guided the experiences of the participants and with phenomenology, the researcher did not want to guide the experiences. The researcher started with the following question: Tell me your experience with the High Achievement Program. Generally, interviewees began with their favorite parts. Then the interview moved to more challenging aspects of the experience. The researcher employed several strategies such as restating the general question, remaining silent, or asking one or more of the following questions:

• How did you feel about being part of an affinity group?

• What stands out the most for you in your experience with the High Achievement

Program?

• Were there barriers that the High Achievement Program helped you to overcome?

• How did the High Achievement Program impact your ability to self-advocate?

• How did the High Achievement Program assist you in navigating through the high

school?

• How did being a part of the High Achievement Program impact your relationships with

your peers who were not involved?

• How did the High Achievement Program prepare you for the collegiate environment?

The researcher collected data from interviews that were recorded. The data also included

notes and impressions from the interviews. In phenomenology, the interview serves two main

purposes: (1) it may be used as a method of gathering information that provides an in depth

understanding of a phenomenon and (2) it may be used as a conduit for a conversation about the

meaning of the experience (Van Manen, 2014). The interview was more like a conversation.

Theme Analysis

Keeping with the nature of phenomenological study, the researcher analyzed the

interviews, and paid close attention to the entirety of the lived experiences. The researcher

looked for significance and not expositions (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher assessed "the data

of experience as imperative in understanding the behavior" (p. 21) of the participants.

While analyzing the data, the researcher continued the epoche process utilized prior to the

investigation. The epoche process enabled the researcher to set aside her beliefs, opinions, and

feelings about the High Achievement Program.

The researcher gathered the information and looked for common themes throughout each participant's lived experience. Analysis of themes was an important aspect of analyzing data collected for phenomenological study. The classification of themes represented a facet of the lived experience that the researcher was trying to comprehend. It did not capture the full essence of the experience (Van Manen, 1990). The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews in order to look for themes within the experiences.

Once the themes were identified, the researcher categorized the interview responses under those themes. The researcher examined how those themes related to the lived experience of the participants. The researcher created a narrative of those themes. The themes centered on the significance of the High Achievement program in the lived experience of the participants.

Limitations and Delimitations

The data collection challenges the researcher anticipated centered on the availability and memory of the participants. The researcher's method relied solely on interviews. Those interviews were conducted with former students. The researcher had to overcome bias connected with the study. She did that by journaling her thoughts and preconceived notions. During the interviews when she felt herself overcome with emotions, she stopped and took several deep breaths before continuing with the interview. Also, the literature reviewed was heavily centered on the experiences of African American students, because at the time of this study they made up the majority of the High Achievement Program.

The following were challenges that the researcher encountered:

- The students had to recall their lived experience while they were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program.

- Although, the High Achievement Program was designed to support African American and Latino students, the majority of the students actively engaged in HAP were African American. Therefore, the majority of the participants for this study was African American.

- The researcher's biases could impact data collection, such as, the researcher's time and energy invested in the development of the High Achievement Program; the researcher's personal time invested in participants outside the school setting and the researcher's own lived experience while actively engaged in leading the High Achievement Program.

- The researcher needed to be particularly mindful of her biases regarding how the achievement gap, opportunity gap, race and culture, the school's culture and identity factor into the lives of the students who comprised the High Achievement Program.

- Students who declined to participate due to scheduling conflicts.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher needed to be aware of potential biases because she was researching the lived experiences of students who were in the program. The researcher did not want to influence their answers or have them obligated to answer in a manner that pleased the researcher. The researcher needed to be very transparent with the participants and let them know that she wanted them to be completely truthful. The researcher let them know that their responses would not affect her in a personal manner or impact their relationship.

The researcher needed to be cognizant of her feelings about the High Achievement Program; therefore, she had to set aside her beliefs in order not to bias the findings.

As stated earlier, the researcher did not use current students. According to the Students in Research module (2014), it is imperative that faculty researchers not use their own students as research subjects, as to avoid the potential for coercion whether intentional or unintentional.

The researcher kept in mind the following from the Belmont Report (1979): "The principle of respect for persons requires that participation in research be truly voluntary, free from coercion or undue influence. Even when a study is innocuous, subjects must be informed that they do not have to take part and they may choose to stop participating at any time."

Summary

The researcher described the methodology of the phenomenological study in Chapter Three. She began the chapter with noting that phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of daily experiences. Phenomenology moves one to inquire more. Phenomenology is more about asking questions than responding (Van Manen, 2014). That inquiry or questioning is centered on the lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program.

Phenomenology is the manner of entry to the world as we encounter it pre-reflectively. Pre-reflective encounters are the common encounters that we have on a daily basis. They are encounters that we live in and live through. Those encounters can come in the form of engaging in conversations, taking walks, dining, embracing someone, recollecting an incident-these are all pre-reflective encounters from a phenomenological standpoint (Van Manen, 2014).

The details of the design, instrumentation and measures, data collection, data analysis, limitations and delimitations, and ethical considerations showed the researcher's commitment to the integrity of the phenomenological structure.

<center>**Chapter Four**</center>

<center>**Lived Experience of Students Who Were Actively Engaged in the High Achievement**</center>

<center>**Program at a Suburban High School**</center>

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to seek a deeper understanding of why the students stayed actively engaged in the High Achievement Program; a deeper understanding of the success of the program that gave voice to what students were experiencing. The nature of the study was phenomenological, so the researcher could delve deeper into the student experience of those who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program. These students are taking honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. The High Achievement Program supports them in those classes. The support comes in the form of tutoring, communicating with teachers on behalf of the students, providing a physical space to complete assignments and meet with other HAP peers to collaborate on projects and other class assignments.

Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes more than ever are seen as steppingstones to college. There is a belief that these classes are the foundation of collegiate matriculation for students of color. Currently, there is very little research into how students of color manage in these classes (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2007). There is also little research on what type of in-school support is needed to help Latino and African American students to succeed.

The researcher chose this method because phenomenology demonstrates how meaning uncovers itself and it does not construct an ideology or a core of knowledge. It forced the researcher to engage in reflection that brings understanding of what it means to exist in the world

<center>47</center>

while acknowledging the uniqueness of each one's existence (Van Manen, 2014). The researcher believed that a phenomenological study would enable her to examine the conditions and assumptions of the lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school.

The participants, through face-to-face interviews, shared those "conditions, constraints and assumptions." The 19 participants, who the researcher was able to contact through social media, had high school graduation dates that ranged from 2012 to 2015. Seventeen participants were African American and two were Hispanic/Latino. Five participants identified as male and 14 identified as female. Eighteen attended this high school all four years and one transferred in during her sophomore year. All enrolled in a post-secondary institution after graduation from this high school. Six enrolled in a Community College and thirteen enrolled in a University. Fictitious names were assigned to each participant in order to honor their anonymity, yet acknowledge their humanity.

Themes that emerged offer insight into the lived experience of the nineteen participants. The themes were (1) empowerment, (2) a sense of belonging through racial affinity, (3) the school's culture centered around expectations and (4) the impact of the High Achievement Program on their college experience. These four were considered as emerging themes because they were steadily present in the discussion with the participants. At some juncture during the interviews, each participant gave an example of self-advocacy, a sense of belonging through racial affinity, the school's culture and the impact on their college experience. The researcher also includes considerations that were not thematic throughout the participants' responses, but highlighted the uniqueness of their lived experiences.

Participants expressed the empowerment they received from the High Achievement Program

"Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (The World Bank Group, 2016). Empowerment matters in an environment that is dominated by a deficit narrative attributed to African American and Latino students. The underlying assumption of the achievement gap is that African American and Latino students have deficits that keep them from achieving at the same levels as white students. White students are the standard whereby we measure students who are not white. Therefore, without the High Achievement Program, the participants felt powerless to rise above the dominant narrative of perceived inferiority.

The interviews revealed they were empowered to speak up in class, to decide if assigned groups met their academic and socio-emotional needs, to determine what success meant to them and to seek out racial affinity without feeling apologetic about wanting to be with other students who look like them. The participants' capacity to make choices that would impact their lived experience for their benefit was apparent in their responses.

Students were empowered to advocate for themselves. Due to the limited number of students of color in advanced classes, the participants in the High Achievement Program often expressed to the coordinator hesitancy in speaking up in class when they did not understand the material or when they wanted to add to a class discussion. The coordinator of the High Achievement Program gave them the tools to get beyond that hesitancy and advocate for themselves. Those tools consisted of how and when to talk to their teachers and white peers. They were often reminded that their voice mattered and they were just as important as anyone else in their classes.

That advocacy was lived out differently for each participant. For Samara that empowerment came with the ability to be heard, speak up for herself. She described:

"It was the number one way that I learned how to speak up for myself when it came to education, because before I was in the program, if I didn't understand something that was happening in class, or if I felt like I was being treated a certain way by the teacher or not being heard, or even if I felt like certain material wasn't being taught properly or if I felt like the teacher was not connecting with the students and I wasn't learning, I would never speak up for myself. I would just kind of fall into the background and stay quiet because I didn't really want to make any noise and draw any attention towards myself, but once I entered the program it taught me that if you don't speak up for yourself, then nobody would. You are already in the classroom and you are kind of already forgotten and in the background, so if you don't announce yourself and speak up and be proud, you will never be heard. So before the program, I was almost invisible. Once I was in it, it was kind of like a moment of clarity. If I don't speak up for myself, then nobody will."

For Judy that empowerment came through the High Achievement Program's ability to be a facilitator when there was a conflict. Judy expounded:

"I don't think there was ever a time when I would come in and complain or talk about an issue with a teacher and that the coordinator would just say okay I'm going to go talk to them for you. It was like, what do you think you should say to them? Here are the ways that we can approach it. Do you want me to sit down with you and then you kind of do all the talking? The HAP coordinator would just be there facilitating or sit there as that middle person and try to keep it from the blame game on either side. The way that she advocated on my behalf was a much more empowering experience than I'm just going to

take over. It was not until things got really, really bad, like grade-wise, when I was almost failing Calculus that she actually stepped in and said, okay, well, these things are not going as well, so I will also talk to him. So, that was probably my first experience having an adult or mentor empower me rather than taking over so that I could succeed, giving me the tools to do what I needed to do as opposed to doing it for me. Yeah, the coordinator was probably the first time that I actually had an empowering experience."

As the participants described their experiences, they emphasized how the High Achievement Program and the coordinator helped them to be comfortable with being the only of one of a few students of color in their classes. They expressed that they knew they deserved to be there just like the white students.

Many participants pointed out that the empowerment carried over into college. They felt more confident to speak with professors without feeling intimidated by their authority. Jackie reflected on this in the following manner:

"I've had to really advocate for myself in college just because I go to such a big university. It's like you're not even a name you're just a number in the system and your advisers don't know who you are or your professors don't know who you are and the teaching assistant does not even know who you are. So just learning to not be so afraid of people in positions of authority. I think one thing that was really good about the higher achievement program is that we would meet with the teachers and the principal at some point. Just kind of bridging the gap between you're a kid and this person is in the position of authority you."

Mimi added: "I'm not afraid in college. I ask my professors if I need help."

Nisha conveyed: I had a professor this year. I go to a predominately white college and she said something kind of racist, so I felt the need to speak up because I had you in my head saying don't let them do this don't let them do this."

The High Achievement Program empowered several participants to not be afraid to seek out opportunities in college.

Marva shared: "Every day I'm like oh my God without the HAP advisor I don't know what I would've done. In college I am so proactive with antiracism. I campaign. I speak out about it. I join clubs just to break through those barriers. I am so involved. I'm in student Government. I'm active with the student diversity and inclusion office. So that's helped me to be like an activist and help things move forward."

Mimi expressed: "I seek other opportunities. I was selected to go to Washington DC as a student representative. I just appreciate everything the program has done for us, all of those skills really paid off and really helped us grow as people."

Marva conveyed: "The coordinator helped us just to think for ourselves, to be responsible for ourselves and our actions, and to ask for help when we needed it. She just made us very independent. And made us realize that it's only us who can move forward and teach others along the way. It's a hard thing to carry but we have to do it or nothing will change. She's the reason I'm even at St. Thomas right now."

Being empowered gave the participants the ability to take risks, become visible, and advocate in their post-secondary career. They took risks by participating in trivia competitions that were historically white. They took risks by subjecting themselves to debates of the material when being placed in groups that consisted of white peers in their Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes. They took risks by inviting themselves to be part of study

groups that were exclusively white. They made themselves visible by answering questions in class or asking for clarification when they did not understand a concept or an assignment. They were empowered to find their place in their collegiate setting with the belief that they belonged there. They felt prepared to be one of a few students of color in their college classes. Empowerment gives them the ability to engage further in their learning (Edutopia, February 12, 2012).

A Sense of Belonging through Racial Affinity

The second theme emerged from the participants' feelings of affirmation associated with being a part of a racial affinity group. Affinity groups affirm students' identities while equipping them to find their place within the school's community. This theme is pivotal in highlighting the need for students of color in predominantly white educational environments to have a space where they do not feel isolated. Being a student of color in a predominantly white school can be a challenge wherein an affinity group can provide a sphere of safety, an emotional safety. That sphere of safety provides an opportunity for students of color to discuss the isolation that they feel. The relationships that are built through race-based affinity groups provide a space where feelings can be shared and self-esteem boosted. Schools benefit from affinity groups. Schools can get strategies that they can employ to enhance the school's overall culture and to nurture racial identity development (Parsons & Ridley, 2012).

Robert expressed that affirmation:

"So yeah, just being in that space was very like warm. 'Cause like being in a class full of a bunch of white people, when I would do good on a test, everybody would be like, oh my gosh, what, Robert did better than me! They would be so surprised and that would make me feel dumb. But when I would come to HAP, everybody would be like what

Robert that's what's up. They would be asking me for help. I got more affirmation from the people who looked like me."

Donna added:

"It was very affirming to see, like, other people, because it was really awkward when you go into a class and nobody looks like you. It was easier for me and more beneficial for me to be with people who looked like me to understand not only what it was like to be in that class, but the experience of being biracial and black in that class."

Samara voiced:

"It felt like a weight was lifted off your shoulders and it was like once you are with those people in a space (designated for HAP) that was safe, you could finally breathe and you didn't have to pretend to be someone or act a certain way so you are not perceived a certain way by others. You could just relax and share your experiences without being judged or having to be super careful about the way you say things or the way you act and the way you come across, because you understand these people know what you are going through when it comes to being a minority, trying to achieve in higher level classes and it felt like a moment where you could finally be yourself and not worry about all these other little things."

Feelings of acceptance and not second-guessing themselves when they were in racial affinity were thoughts that were shared by some of the participants. Racial grouping of students based on academic and social needs can be helpful combatting the feelings of marginalization of black and Latino students. Gandara (2008) refers to this process as "cocooning." Cocooning allows the students of color to establish an identity in a nonthreatening environment.

Mimi stated:

"It was a really good. I was accepted and I really felt like I could be myself. I didn't have to put myself down because sometimes I would feel less with another group. I didn't have to second-guess myself. If I were to say an answer and I know I'm not correct, I'm thinking that I'm in the right direction, I don't have to feel ashamed or embarrassed. It boosted my self-confidence because I didn't have to feel like they (white students) were going to judge me."

Others added that they felt safe when they were with students in the High Achievement Program. They felt safe to speak up without being judged. They felt safe to be themselves. It was not a physical safety, but it was an emotional safety.

Debra conveyed that sense of safety:

"It felt like home. It felt safe. In the classrooms I was like the only one or if not the only one, one of maybe two or three. I mean of people of color. There were three of us, maximum, in the class with like 35 students. It was weird because when you did well, it wasn't expected, so it was a shock. When you excelled in anything or when you actually try to help someone or these white kids with something that they were doing, it was a shocker."

Sia added:

"It felt good. The high school was mostly, like, white people and I know there was a handful of people of color but in a sense we all got to stick together and even though that might offend white people I liked it. Because it was kind of like a little safe space where we could all comfort each other and be there for each other. Instead of like taking AP and

IB classes and being one of a few Black students in a class and not talking to each other, it was nice to come together work together saying that it's okay."

Robert shared:

"The school is white and everyone around us is white. When we wanted to spend time with our friends, we would do it in the hallways. It just seemed like all we ever did was crowd the hallway, but they didn't give us another space. But it was like they didn't even care about us, and even, like, with the HAP coordinator's room, it was such a hassle to try to get into her room and that was the only space that we had. If it weren't for that room and the coordinator especially, I probably wouldn't have done as good as I did in high school. That space was like, I can be around people who look like me. It was more than just like a homework space, too. We could talk to the coordinator about anything. So, we wouldn't have to worry about ears listening and people judging us for who we were."

Racial affinity grouping brings affirmation, an opportunity to be who they are without judgment. It is a creation of community based on a common experience of being one of a few in AP/IB/honors classes (Tatum, 2007). The participants described a strong sense of community and affirmation when interacting their HAP peers.

How the Participants Navigated the Culture of the School Centered on Expectations

If culture reflects how we act on a daily basis, then school culture would have to reflect how we act within the confines of the school's setting. School culture sets the norms and expectations of the school. School culture is multifarious with a system of beliefs, customs, procedures and principles (Muhammad & Hollie, 2012).

Whatever is important to the community at large, will be important within the school. If valuing all the cultures is important to the community at large, then valuing all cultures will be important within the school, too. Some of the participants did not experience a valuing of their cultural identity.

An important component of constructing an atmosphere where talents and gifts are cultivated in students from different backgrounds is an earnest belief that all students can achieve at high levels accompanied with instructional and mass assistance (Kyburg et al., 2007). The participants conveyed thoughts that there was not an expectation that they could or would achieve at high levels. The lack of expectations for them to achieve lay with white peers as well as teachers. Many participants in this study had experiences where they were one of the only students of color assigned to work in a group of white students and their contribution to the work was not acknowledged. There was an unspoken expectation that African American and Latino students' contributions could not be trusted. The "myth of inferiority" became the reality of the school's culture. Schools are not impervious to the racial and cultural biases that play out in society. Those attitudes creep their way into the classrooms and African American and Latino students are on the receiving end of those negative attitudes. There are educators who do not believe that African American and Latino students have high intellectual capabilities (Ford, 1996) and there are white peers who hold those beliefs, too. The participants have witnessed such held beliefs from teachers and white peers.

Samara expressed feelings of not being acknowledged and the struggle of trying to avoid being stereotyped. She described that experience:

"I think the only way that I could really describe it is kind of a passive aggressive-like environment, because people know you're there but they don't acknowledge you, but you

57

will be acknowledged when it comes to negative things. If certain students of color act out or do things, it is almost as if it is a representation of me and I have to carry that burden. But it's like once I do something that is positive, it's almost shocking. Like when I wrote the paper to send to Education Post, I couldn't believe the number of teachers that I never met were like, "Oh, I read your piece and it was so amazing!" It was like there was so much attention on me almost to the point where it was uncomfortable, because it was almost like I can't believe that you were capable of doing that. It's just kind of like these two polar opposites where you carry the burden of all these stereotypes that people already put on you and once you achieve something positive, even if it shouldn't be such a shock, and you shouldn't get so much recognition for it like an average white student wouldn't, all that attention makes you uncomfortable. It's just constantly fighting between not being a stereotype, not being praised for things that I should be expected to do and not falling into the background and being invisible, because it's always a fight between the three."

Donna described it as:

"I remember every time we did the study guide, we would have a group of three of four and that would be your group for that unit, not like unit, but quarter or every month or so. We were going through the unit study guide for a final and I said what I thought the answer was, a multiple-choice answer. I said that I think its "B." They were like, we think it's "C." I said this is why I think it's "B." These were all the correct answers, because I had all the correct answers and I knew that I did, but they outnumbered me and they said, well, we think you're wrong. We think it is this this and that. I said, okay, fine. Umm. We went through the answers, we didn't get 100%, which meant we didn't get the extra

credit and they didn't even apologize to me. They just oh, whatever, we got that one wrong. Even though, we could have had it right, if they had gone with my answer, but they didn't want to."

Michael described the culture of the school in the following way:

"I feel like the teachers had either very low expectation for the students of color or very high expectations for the students of color where they felt like they didn't need to help them. I feel like just black and brown students were either pitied upon or they were highly thought of as this student of the year type of situation. A lot things I noticed, there were assumptions that I wouldn't do my homework. White students were given the benefit of the doubt. With me being in three sports and getting home around 9 o'clock every day, it was hard for me to get everything done. Yet, there was no empathy for me. I was hit with the hammer on every occasion. White students always got the benefit of doubt. They were excused or given an extra day to do it. If I didn't do it, it was taken that day and graded completely. I was given the grade that I got. It was a definite issue at school.

Jackie shared:

"I think that it was a very necessary program and I don't think I would've wanted to go to college without it. I would just say that the general vibe in the school at least when I was there and I haven't been there for a while was you just feel really defeated. When you walk those halls you feel like you're fighting to get something that's bigger than you, something that's set-in place that you know nothing about. I think it's very easy to get stuck there, feeling like you're defeated and I think of kids that I went to school with who were always getting in trouble for doing absolutely nothing. It just kind of makes you feel

like if this program would not have been in place I just wonder where would we be now? Because there's no one there to make you feel like you're valid."

Sia and Zenna did not feel that teachers had the same expectations for them as they did for white students. Sia stated:

"I had a teacher who was so indifferent about me or any other student of color getting a C. I don't think that was okay because if it were a white student they would be mad at them and tell them that they could do better. "

Zenna added:

"In math class I had a teacher who would go up to every single white student and asked them if they did their homework and somehow she would go past me. It was I and another black student she would just walk past us if to say oh I know you didn't do your homework. I would say oh you didn't check our homework and she would say, "Oh, wait, you did it?""

Mitchell described his experience with low expectations:

"I'm not sure if I told you about this experience I had but it was when I had AP environmental science and it was pretty shady what the teacher did. So basically, he pulled me aside it was towards the end of class and he asked me a really, really strange question. He was like so you know how to read right? I mean I got an A in his class so I felt like I showed him. I feel like teachers should get some type of sensitivity training where they're taught just because someone is of a certain ethnicity they can be just as varied as two white people."

Being singled out was a sentiment expressed by some of the participants. One example:

"Even in those classes, the hypertensions and the micro aggressions of just being the only one person or like the few people of color in that class and like, the teachers, if you do something good, they applaud it and they give you a pat on the back, like it is so great, even though you are just doing your work. Or, you know, they, like, single you out. They say, hey, you're not doing so well. What's up? They do it in front of the whole class. So it was like whatever you did, you were the center of attention."

Another participant added:

"It's like what you see at other high schools, students of color are expected to perform worse and when you do perform well, it's like an individual thing. You're that good student of color and you're going to go far when everyone else isn't."

Marva shared:

"For example asking me if I need additional help when I didn't even ask for any help. Why are you putting that spotlight on me? I didn't ask for any help. I'm good. They give you extra attention but not for the right reasons. But when it comes to showing what you know, they easily just skip over you."

David stated:

"Being surrounded by a lot of the students in the High Achievement Program helped me to break away from a lot of stereotypes. You know the kind of stuff that goes with being a young black man and even having ADHD. It made me want to do better because I was seeing how other students were doing in the class. There was no reason that I couldn't do as well as them."

There are many purported reasons for the failure rates of African American and Latino children in the United States. Some of those reasons are attributed to the education level of the

61

parents, cultural composition of the students, socioeconomic status, the accessibility to high quality preschool, belief systems of teachers and the quality of curriculum and instruction (Education Commission on the States). There is a societal belief that reason is that black children are intellectually inferior – less capable than white children (Delpit, 2012). This assumption of inferiority is prevalent when the achievement of white students is examined. Black and brown children are compared to white students in terms of achievement with white students being the standard. The participants expressed the assumption of inferiority.

The Impact of the High Achievement Program on Their College Experience

Aspects of the High Achievement Program that were highlighted were helpful in establishing study habits, time management techniques, and confidence that they could succeed in college, preparation for the lack of racial diversity in their college classes, and seeking opportunities for antiracist activism.

Robert shared:

"Oh yeah… Like HAP, for example, gave us ways to study. I didn't take it serious at first, but knowing how hard it was going to be. I knew that I would have to be on my grind, when it came to college. It got me in the habit of sitting down and studying with my peers. Coming up with little techniques of things to do."

Louise added:

"It taught me study habits, because I know a lot of people that I had studied with this past year, they didn't have any at all. What we would use to do with the Psychology study stuff, I took that with me. They were, like, lost. So, I was able to teach them some stuff, too. Study habits and taking college seriously. The coordinator of the High Achievement

Program made sure we stayed on our stuff, so I took that with me, too. I got to do this. I got to make this happen if I can. "

Cathy shared:

"I think taking the AP classes and being in HAP really helped me because my first year in college I did really well. I didn't struggle with anything. There were other students in my classes who had time management troubles and studying for test and I didn't. It was the first time in my life that I felt like I was smarter than everybody else."

Donna expressed:

"It gave me the confidence to believe in myself that I am a college student. I can do these things. So when I got into college I wasn't like, oh I don't belong. I said that this is the place that I belong. This is the place that I need to be. I am a college student and I am going to do good while I'm here."

Judy and Marva shared their thoughts about being prepared for the lack of diversity they knew they would encounter attending a predominantly white institution.

Judy's thoughts:

"I was more prepared to be one of the only black students in all of my classes and aware of what that might look like as opposed to dancing through college and wondering why am I being treated differently and things like that. Because I had the basis and the foundation to understand that I wasn't alone, even though I felt like I was alone, but there were other black students who were the only ones in their classes. In college I am at a predominantly white institution and a lot of the things that I learned about education and racial equity in the classroom and how a good professor addresses that as opposed to a professor struggling with it, I learned all of that in high school through HAP and I was

able to say like, okay, these are the professors who are actually on it, they get it and these are people I know that I can go to for support and kind of create my own HAP, if you will. I have a network now of people who would advocate for me in terms of letters of recommendations or if something were to happen. If I hadn't begun that process in high school, and then gone straight into college without any understanding of the racial dynamics within a classroom and why that is so important, I think I would have been so lost, in terms of my own personal identity and my identity as a student, as a scholar, in college.

Marva added:

"HAP helped me so much. Every day I'm like oh my God without the HAP coordinator, I don't know what I would've done. In college I am so proactive with antiracism. I campaign. I speak out about it. I join clubs just to break through those barriers. Just to prove that I'm here. My school is white. It's so white. It's even harder to find a group of friends because of that. They're all rich and they've never had a problem in school and they have all the attention they've ever needed. So in college I am so involved. I'm in student Government. I'm active with the student diversity and inclusion office. So HAP helped me to be like an activist. "

The experience of being African American or Latino in a predominantly white environment affects African American and Latino students in ways that can be positive or negative. They are included and excluded, heard and not heard in classrooms (Carter, 2008). According to the participants, the High Achievement Program prepared them for their predominantly white collegiate environment. They were not only prepared for the academic rigor, but for the lack of racial diversity.

Considerations That Were Not Thematic throughout the Participants' Responses

Because phenomenology examines lived experiences, it would be expected that the participants would have commonalities in their experiences. However, it would also be expected that there would be parts of their experiences that are unique to the individual participant. Because of that, the researcher highlighted some of those unique parts that would be relevant to the nature of the study.

Judy's Thoughts on Diversity at a Suburban High School and How that Diversity Plays out in Advanced Classes and Regular Classes

"My racial identity wasn't really solid in terms of my black side, because I never really hung out with the black student population in high school. Before I was involved in HAP (High Achievement Program), none of my friends were people of color and I had minor acquaintances with some people of color and my closest friends were people that I had class with, but the majority of the time I spent in honors and AP, that meant they were white, so, it wasn't until my sophomore year, I had to drop Honors English 10, during second semester, it was a full year course. I had a really hard time writing this research paper that my grade was so poor that my teacher suggested, I think along with the counseling staff, that I drop to regular English, English 10. It was at that point that I realized this, right, like, you can talk about diversity and I think our high school has a relativity diverse student population. But when you classify it based upon what classes students are taking and the teacher expectations for different students, then it isn't that diverse. In my Honors English class, I was the only student of color, but there were only two or three white students in the class when I dropped down to English 10. That was really only the first time that I had ever had class with another black student. I felt like

65

the class was much more engaging and relatable. The course material seemed to touch on things that were more relevant for students of color as opposed to this honors English, we read stuff that was out of touch, like Carl Jung, which I guess is like important, but all the novels and books we read, they were all by white dead men, except for a few female writers. That was really the first time that I felt like any of the dynamics that were present in the student population of the class were actually addressed in the course material. That was the first time that it sort of hit me in the face, the stark contrast of how students of color were being taught and the way that the honor students were being taught.

Samara's Feelings of Not Being Seen as an Individual

"I personally always felt this uncomfortable way where teachers would make me the voice of people who were like me, Somali students, Muslim students and Muslim girls, black girls. I had a teacher come up to me and ask me why certain students who look like me are being disruptive and disrespectful and I'm not like that. So, she was basically putting me in the position to answer why I'm this way and why they are that way and why we are not like each other because in her eyes it was like there could only be one version of people who look like me. It's like I don't get the right to be an individual and be my own person. I have to either fall into a negative stereotype or be this exception to the rule that makes them feel comfortable with people of color. "

Summary

Nineteen former students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school were interviewed for this study. Narratives collected from the interviews were analyzed and four themes emerged. Those four themes were: (1) empowerment, (2) a sense of belonging through racial affinity, (3) the school's culture and (4) the impact of the High Achievement Program on their college experience.

Furthermore, there were considerations that were not thematic throughout the participants' responses, but highlighted the uniqueness of their lived experiences. The themes and the considerations helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school. In conclusion, the researcher will offer her insights on the themes, research supporting themes, and considerations for schools with similar programs or those schools looking to implement a program similar to the High Achievement Program.

Chapter Five

Discussion of the Phenomenon

Introduction

The researcher invited readers to take a glimpse into the lived experience of African American and Latino students who are immersed in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and honors classes. What did it feel like to be them? What was it like to see through their eyes? Readers were invited to see what support was meaningful for them. The researcher invited you into the lived experience of students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school. Readers were invited to wonder about the impact that intentional academic and social support has on African American and Latino students in advanced classes.

The High Achievement Program began with a vision of not only increasing the numbers of African American and Latino students in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes, but also helping them to succeed in those classes. By understanding their experiences, the researcher hopes to engage educational systems that are grappling with what type of in-school support is needed for these students and to provide a deeper understanding of their lived experience in these classes. How can their lived experiences transform how one thinks about who belongs in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors classes?

This phenomenological study is to examine the lived experience of students who were engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school focused on two racial groups: African American and Hispanic/Latino American. The program was designed to support those two groups. The researcher defined being actively engaged as attending 75% of the group

meetings, participating in 50% of the college visits and visiting the High Achievement Program's office at least once per week.

The method of investigation was the phenomenological interview. The phenomenological interview provided rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. Each of the 19 participant interviews was audio-recorded. The names of the participants were altered in order to maintain their anonymity.

The 19 interviews were carried out employing fixed questions and fluid questions. The participants were asked the same primary question and the secondary questions varied by participants in order to get inside the experience. The participants were permitted to lead from the primary question. Phenomenology simply inquires about the experience (van Manen, 1990). That particular experience is lived differently for each individual. Although, the intention was to ask all 19 participants the same sets of questions, each lived experience emerged as unique and necessitated that the researcher vary the questions.

Participants were asked to describe their overall experience with the High Achievement Program. From that question four main themes emerged. The themes were (1) empowerment, (2) a sense of belonging through racial affinity, (3) the school's culture and (4) the impact of the High Achievement Program on their college experience. These four were considered as emerging themes because they were steadily present in the discussion with the participants. The researcher also included considerations that were not thematic throughout the participants' responses, but highlighted the uniqueness of their lived experience.

Participants expressed the empowerment they received from the High Achievement Program

Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make decisions and to transform those decisions into preferred deeds and outcomes (The World Bank Group, 2016). Empowering students gives them a voice in their learning. They take ownership of their engagement. Their ideas, hopes, dreams, and goals have a place to be validated.

That empowerment surfaced with their ability to advocate for themselves. Prior to being in the High Achievement Program, the consensus was that the participants did not have a voice or felt invisible in their classes. They felt that the program gave them the confidence to speak up in their classes. One of the purposes for The High Achievement Program was to offer support for African American and Latino students in advanced classes. Due to the isolation that accompanies being the only one or one of a few nonwhite students in a class, it can be challenging to muster the confidence to express oneself in class. They were given the confidence by participating in trivia bowl events where the student participant population was predominantly white. They were interviewed by an educational news entity regarding the expectations that teachers have them versus the expectations that they have for themselves. They participated in weekly discussions with the High Achievement Program's coordinator involving their rights to a high-quality education.

According to Crethar, Rivera, and Nash (2008) when persons are not allowed to play a role in practices that impact their lives, they feel helpless, powerless. This feeling can lead them to lessen their motivation to reach their full potential. Bolton and Brookings (1996) developed a series of aspects associated with empowerment. Those aspects that the participants stated were self-advocacy, ambition, assertiveness, and commitment.

A Sense of Belonging through Racial Affinity

According to Kunjufu (2012*),* being one or two nonwhite students in a class of 30 produced feelings of isolation and loneliness, which impacts one's self-worth. That impact may lead to low achievement. Support is needed for the black and brown students in that environment, support that is not often garnered from their white teachers and white peers. That lack of support was evident in the participants' responses when they were asked about their feelings on being a part of a racial affinity group.

Belonging is a psychological need for everyone (Maslow, 1954). A sense of belonging was often absent for the participants when they were in their predominantly white classes. They observed their white peers experiencing camaraderie among themselves and that experience did not extend to the participants. The psychological need for belonging seemed to be met by their white peers, because their environment was a racially white affinity space. Belonging matters because it fosters engagement, connection, support and acceptance (Tatum, 1997). The participants experienced belonging with students who looked like they did.

The participants felt affirmed when they were with the other students in the High Achievement Program. They did not feel the need to prove their worth or their intelligence. Their High Achievement Program peers recognized their intelligence and validated it. Whereas, they felt that their white peers often challenged their intelligence. They did not have those same feelings when they were with students who looked like them. Students mentioned the lack of respect they received when working in groups with their white peers. Their answers were often debated and initially viewed as incorrect. When their answers were proven correct, their white peers did not apologize or even acknowledge their erroneous thinking. This left them feeling inferior to their white peers.

The assumption that black and brown children are intellectually inferior and less capable than their white counterparts is ingrained in the American fabric (Delpit, 2012). Kuykendall (2004) believed that blacks and Latinos are perceived as inferior, and non-industrious when compared to white students. Many of the participants were on the receiving end of that often-unspoken assumption and perception. They experienced offering their insight within a group of white peers, but they are not heard until a white peer repeats what they said, as though that repetition somehow adds credibility to what the student of color said. Although Delpit's (2012) research focused on college students of color, the experiences mimicked those of the participants in this study. In Lisa Delpit's, *Multiplication Is for White People* (2012), students of color said they were not acknowledged when commenting on a topic. This action removes the humanity of the students of color. When they meet with one another in the High Achievement Program, students are able to restore their humanity, because they value each other.

Being a student of color in a predominantly white school can be a challenge whereas an affinity group can provide a sphere of safety. That safety surfaces in an emotional manner. They feel protected to be their authentic selves without fear of being judged. That sphere of safety provides an opportunity for students of color to discuss the isolation that they feel. The relationships that are built through race-based affinity groups provide a space where feelings can be shared and self-esteem boosted (Parsons & Ridley, 2012).

Some of the participants expressed feelings of being safe, emotionally when they were with students who looked like them. They did not feel any judgments, even when they made mistakes. They felt like they could breathe when they were in spaces of racial affinity. The High Achievement Program offered them that space to exhale. They did not have to explain

themselves. They did not have to worry about how they would be perceived. They just knew that they were accepted and valued. They felt like they could be themselves.

The Experience of Expectations at School

If culture reflects how we act on a daily basis, then school culture would have to reflect how we act within the confines of the school's setting. School culture sets the norms and expectations of the school. School culture is multifarious with a system of beliefs, customs, procedures and principles (Muhammad & Hollie, 2012).

If valuing all the cultures is important to the community at large, then valuing all cultures will be important within the school, too. Most of the participants did not feel valued by the school as a whole. They expressed that they did not feel welcomed as they navigated the culture of the school.

An important component of constructing an atmosphere where talents and gifts are cultivated in students from different backgrounds is an earnest belief that all students can achieve at high levels accompanied with instructional and mass assistance (Kyburg et al., 2007). The participants did not feel that that belief extended to them. They did not feel that they were expected to achieve and when they did achieve at a high level, they were viewed as an exception. Prior to being in the High Achievement Program, one of the participants shared that she would give into the narrative that she was not expected to do well, and she did not do well. She had internalized the narrative that was constructed for her. The misperception students of color are led to build about themselves is played out over and over in urban schools and caring teachers are not often aware of it (Jackson, 2011). Eric Mahmoud (2013) argued that society needs to provide positive messages about African American and Latino students in order to counter the narrative in society that spreads negative information.

Whatever assumptions are made about students, teachers will teach to that assumption (Delpit, 2012). What the staff believes about its students is linked to how they interact with students. That belief system is reflective of the school's environment. A staff that believes the students can achieve will position their actions to make sure that achievement occurs. That type of school environment will bring out the best in black and brown students. They will meet or surpass the highest of expectations. The environment that fosters high academic achievement will have teachers who have high expectations for all students. The participants did not feel that their teachers had high expectations for them.

HAP supported the students in spite of the lack of high expectations. The program's coordinator had a set of standards to which she expected the students to adhere. They were expected to keep current with their assignments, to exceed minimum requirements for their assignments, to participate in class discussions, to request missing assignments on the days that they were absent, to be group leaders, and to participate in extracurricular academic activities.

The Impact of the High Achievement Program on the College Experience

Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes more than ever are seen as steppingstones to college. There is a belief that these classes are the foundation of collegiate matriculation for students of color (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2007). The 19 participants have matriculated to college and expressed the impact that the High Achievement Program had on their college experiences. Their participation in the High Achievement Program helped prepare them for the coursework, interacting with professors, taking ownership of their learning and full advantage of the opportunities offered to them, such as summer internships, college ambassadorships, research assistantships, and social justice activism.

Implications of the Study

The College Board (2013) believed that the racial demographics of one's school should reflect the racial demographics of the students enrolled in AP classes. Not only should the classes reflect the racial demographics, but also support systems need to be in place in order to ensure the success of non-white students in the AP classes. Based upon the need to ensure supports are in place, what can schools learn from the lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school?

The purpose of this study was to seek a deeper understanding of their lived experience. Their lived experiences covered navigating the school's culture as an African American or Latino student, racial affinity, self-advocacy which brings about empowerment, teacher expectations, and the impact on their collegiate environment. As other high schools examine their structures in place that serve these populations of students, they can take into account the needs that these 19 students purported.

Schools should be aware that there are patterns that reveal African American and Latino students feel isolated in their advanced classes; therefore, it is important for them to have spaces of racial affinity. Spaces of racial affinity provide them the opportunity to be themselves and not be concerned with judgments that they face from their white peers. Being a student of color in a predominantly white school can be a challenge whereas an affinity group can provide a sphere of safety. That sphere of safety, which is emotional, provides an opportunity for students of color to discuss the isolation that they feel. The relationships that are built through race-based affinity groups provide a space where feelings can be shared and self-esteem boosted. Schools benefit from affinity groups (Parsons & Ridley, 2012).

Being a student of color in a predominantly white environment brought about the will for the participants to advocate for themselves. African American and Latino students in advanced classes need to feel a sense of empowerment, a feeling that they belong in those classes and they can have a voice in guiding their learning. They need to feel confident in speaking up in class without constant fear of being debated or having to prove that they are worthy of being in those classes. A culture of affirmation can be established by the staff, which will transfer to the students. When students of color feel that they have a voice in their classes, then they will feel empowered. That empowerment gives them the social and academic capital to succeed in classes that are overwhelmingly white.

Research indicates what the staff believes about its students is linked to how they interact with students. That belief system is reflective of the school's environment. A staff that believes the students can achieve will position their actions to make sure that achievement occurs. The environment that fosters high academic achievement will have teachers who have high expectations for all students. If teachers hold low expectations for African American and/or Latino they will teach to those low expectations, which will continue to perpetuate the racial disparity in achievement (Delpit, 2012). Having high expectations for African American and Latino students will bring out the best in them.

In-school support is necessary for the success of African American and Latino students navigating the advanced classes. Supports need to be in place in order to ensure the success of non-white students in the AP classes (College Board, 2013). Those supports are not limited to academic assistance, but include emotional and social support, too.

A concerted recruitment effort is necessary in order to increase the enrollment of African American and Latino students in AP/IB/honors classes. The College Board (2013) believed that

the racial demographics of one's school should reflect the racial demographics of the students enrolled in AP classes. The High Achievement Program began with the purpose of increasing the numbers of African American and Latino students in AP, IB, and honors classes. This suburban high school recognized that the school's racial demographics needed to be reflected in the AP/IB/honors classes' enrollment.

Recommendations

In a phenomenological study, the researcher becomes adept throughout its development, is apprised of the conclusions of previous research, has acquired new learning on the subject, and has become aware of recommendations that can be associated with the study (Moustakas, 1994). The recommendations of this study are aligned with the researcher's insights and themes that surfaced.

The lived experiences support schools actively recruiting African American and Latino students to enroll in AP/IB/honors classes. A U.S. Department of Education study gathered that African American and Latino students are three times more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree if they make an effort to take an AP class in high school (Adelman, 2006). Research done by Martinez and Klopott (2005) suggests a similar correlation between AP classes and postsecondary success. The participants in this study have all matriculated to college. The oldest participants will be graduating from college in 2017. Students stated the preparation that they received from enrolling in AP/IB/honors classes played a role in their postsecondary success.

The research supports the establishment of a program that champion African American and Latino students who are enrolled in AP/IB/honors classes. In 2013, the Broad Foundation, a national foundation that focuses on urban schools and has spent $600 million since 1999 to improve student achievement, outlined steps to increase AP access for underrepresented

populations in their expanding AP access report. In their report, the Foundation suggested that academic supports be designed to ensure the success of the students. Those supports could be tutoring sessions, extended instruction, summer school, and test preparation sessions. The High Achievement Program offers similar supports that the Broad Foundation suggests.

Schools can foster a culture that holds high expectations for all students. An important component of constructing an atmosphere where talents and gifts are cultivated in students from different backgrounds is an earnest belief that all students can achieve at high levels accompanied with instructional and mass assistance (Kyburg et al., 2007). In high schools where the number of nonwhite students in advanced classes is obviously fewer than their overall enrollment, a perception that the nonwhite students are less academically capable becomes prevalent (Tyson, 2008).

Predominantly white schools with an enrollment of African American and Latino students can offer spaces of racial affinity. Being a student of color in a predominantly white school can be a challenge wherein an affinity group can provide a sphere of safety. That sphere of safety provides an opportunity for students of color to discuss the isolation that they feel. The relationships that are built through race-based affinity groups provide a space where feelings can be shared and self-esteem boosted. Schools benefit from affinity groups. Schools can get strategies that they can employ to enhance the school's overall culture and to nurture racial identity development (Parsons & Ridley, 2012).

It would be advantageous for schools to offer opportunities for African American and Latino students to explore postsecondary options which include college campus visits. College visits are an important component of the High Achievement Program. African American and Latino students needed to physically visit college campuses to visualize their lives after high

school. It is important for them to see themselves as college students, if college is one of their postsecondary choices. All 19 participants in this study are currently in college and they all participated in college visits while actively engaged in the High Achievement Program. Some of the participants expressed that the only opportunity that they had to visit college campuses occurred at school.

Clustering African American and Latino students in AP/IB/honors classes would be meaningful. Being the only one or one of a few in AP/IB/honors classes is very isolating for African American and Latino students. They can feel put upon to be the experts when discussions are focused on their particular racial group. This can cause much discomfort (Carter, 2008).

Research supports providing an advocate for African American and Latino students in AP/IB/honors classes who empowers them. The Broad Foundation (2013) suggested that there should be an appointed district-wide advocate for the expansion of AP access. The advocate can promote the expansion of AP/IB/honors classes access, as well offer supports for the African American and Latino students who are currently enrolled in AP/IB/honors classes.

Further Research

There is still more that can be gleaned from the lived experiences of African American and Latino students who take AP classes. This phenomenological study is not an exhaustive list of themes or insights (Van Manen, 2014). There is ample opportunity for further research, which includes: (1) The impact of the intersectionality of the social political construction of race and privilege in the Advanced Placement classroom. Who truly benefits from the classes and what happens when white students no longer comprise the majority. (2) In schools with a high population of Muslim students in AP/IB/honors classes, how are they represented in the

curriculum? Is that representation a true depiction of who they are? (3) A longitudinal study of teacher expectations of African American and Latino students prior to, during and after enrolling in Advanced Placement classes. (4) Racial identity development for African American and Latino students in Advanced Placement classes. (5) Recruitment and retention of Native American students in Advanced Placement classes. (6) How is educational equity reflected in AP/IB/honors classes? (7) Micro-aggressions that surface against students who are in similar programs. (8) What type of leadership is needed to sustain a program comparable to HAP? (9) Recruitment and retention of English language learners in Advanced Placement and honors classes.

The Perspective of the High Achievement Coordinator

The High Achievement Program Coordinator, who was also the researcher, dedicated her time to ensuring that the students who were actively engaged in the program felt valued, heard, and seen. It was important for her to hold high expectations for them, even if that was not ingrained in the culture of the school. She impressed upon them the importance of setting a standard of excellence which was antithetical to the dominate narrative about black and brown students.

The coordinator invested her heart and soul into the program with an emphasis on a family-like environment. The students and coordinator were on equal footing and they all learned from each other. They challenged each other to be their best selves.

The coordinator believes that the dedication of the leader is a critical component to the success of the program. The coordinator had to make accommodations regarding her time in order to meet the needs of the students. Those accommodations meant that she would have to

meet with students after school, on weekends and even during school breaks to ensure their success.

The coordinator believes that it will take every educational stakeholder to be the champion for African American and Latino in order for them to have positive lived experiences in AP/IB/honors classes. The coordinator had to be their champion. She was the champion for the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at a suburban high school.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study was more than just remembering what it was like to be actively engaged in the High Achievement Program. It was about deriving meaning from the experience, reflecting on inherent details of the lived experience and the value of the investigation. It was the revelation of the essence of the experience in a way not yet seen (Van Manen, 1990).

The study offered the reader a glance into the lived experience of the students who were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program through research, student experiences and recommendations. It is the researcher's hope that this study can be used to begin or enhance similar programs designed to support African American and Latino students in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and honors classes at other schools.

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Appendix

Research Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study of your lived experience when you were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at St. Louis Park High School. I, Lee-Ann Stephens, hope to obtain a deeper understanding of the impact that intentional academic and social support in Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate/honors classes has on African American and Latino students for other schools and districts. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were actively engaged in the High Achievement Program at St. Louis Park High School. This research is for the Doctorate of Education in Leadership Program in which I am enrolled at Bethel University in Arden Hills, Minnesota.

If you decide to participate, I will ask you a set of questions about your experience with the High Achievement Program. The estimated time required will be between 45 minutes to an hour. In participating there is an emotional risk of stirring up difficult emotions and memories. The benefit to participating is the offering of insights to other schools and districts that are looking for ways to retain and support African American and Latino students in Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate/honors classes.

No confidential information will be retained other than the consent form. Each participant will be given an alternate first name. In order to capture your interview in its full capacity, I will audiotape, along with taking written notes.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with the High Achievement Program or Bethel University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting such relationships.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans. If you have any questions about the research and/or research participants' rights or wish to report a research- related injury, please call Lee-Ann Stephens at 612-516-4484 or Dr. Mary Michener, Research Advisor at 651-635-8001.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Researcher   Date