AN EXPLORATION OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES: A CASE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN DIFFERENT ENGLISH TRACKS

by

Brian Keith Williams

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Approved by:

_____
Dr. Bruce Taylor

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Dr. Chance Lewis

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Dr. Tehia Starker Glass

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Dr. Jae Hoon Lim

ABSTRACT

BRIAN KEITH WILLIAMS. An exploration of learning experiences: A case study of African American male high school students in different English tracks. (Under the direction of DR. BRUCE TAYLOR)

This study used qualitative research methodology and a case study design to explore how African American male high school students within differently tracked English courses described their learning experience. The study involved eight African American male high school students and took place during the 2014 fall academic semester. The researcher served as an outside observer as data were collected in each English track (Standard, Honors, and Advance Placement). Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. The goal of the study was to explore how African American males in differently tracked English courses described their learning experiences, focusing on teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience. Data were collected for eight weeks and later analyzed using thematic analysis. It was found participants in the advance track English courses experienced higher teacher expectations, more academic collaboration, and more active approaches to learning than the Standard track participants. It was also found participants in Honors and Advance Placement English experienced racial isolation because they were the only African Americans in their courses. Contrarily, Standard track students did not experience racial isolation because of their diverse classrooms, but experienced academic isolation as the majority of their assignments and activities were independent in nature.

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CHAPTER I: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A growing body of research suggests the "achievement gap" reflects, in part, an opportunity gap created by differences in track placement (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Tracking involves the division of students of similar educational level into groups to receive instruction according to different curricula (Irvine, 1991). Tracking systems are known to create classifications determining both the quantity and the type of education students receive. Consequently, this classification process affects students' access to an excellent education (Oakes, 2005). Despite this research, most students continue to be sorted and schooled in ways that engender and perpetuate educational and societal inequities (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Tracking is widespread and separates children by race and class resulting in the maintenance and reproduction of a system of social and economic stratification (Irvine, 1991). Although dividing students by ability, on the surface, seems to be a sound educational practice, students of color and of low-socioeconomic status often suffer from this grouping format (Irvine, 1991). Students of color and those from the lowest socioeconomic levels have been consistently found in disproportionate numbers in classes at the lowest track levels of education and students from upper socioeconomic levels have been found to be consistently overrepresented in higher tracks (Moore & Lewis, 2012; Oakes, 2005). The tracking format is so deeply rooted in the education system that the differences in curriculum, instruction, and materials between levels of

classes are such that students within the same school can have vastly different educational experiences and projections of success (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009, p. 221).

Tracking arose to address real and perceived challenges and shortcomings of the education system in the U.S. Tracking formats were prescribed as an antidote to successfully meet the learning needs of students with diverse academic abilities (Oakes, 1985). "Defenders of the system claim that it allows for individualized instruction, the development of more positive student self concepts, and more effective and efficient instruction" (Nevi, 1987). However, this system has contributed more to the miseducation of students than the desired academic achievement (Irvine, 1991). In fact, there is a plethora of research indicating that tracking has little educational benefit for students and is deleterious to academic achievement, extracurricular participation, self-concept, peer relationships, career aspirations, and motivation (Irvine, 1991). Tracking creates segregation within schools and perpetuates a system where students receive an unequal education, a divide between students of color, low socioeconomic students and their White middle to upper class counterparts (Green, 1999). Ultimately, this grouping of students by race, class, and academic ability creates a negative interpretation of the education experience for those marginalized by the tracking structure (Moore & Lewis, 2012).

Testing student intelligence has provided school systems with the justification needed for tracking students; "intelligence tests are utilized to identify the able, the normal, and the slow from the start, to provide students with appropriate instruction, and by secondary school sort them out according to their likely careers" (Green, 1999, p.237).

Supporters of tracking argue it is less difficult for teachers to accommodate the individual differences of students if they are grouped according to ability (Adams-Byers, Whitsell, & Moon, 2004). Further, they suggest incorporating a homogeneous class structure within schools can potentially make it easier for instructors to gather materials and use specific teaching methods for the appropriate ability levels of their classrooms (Powell, 2011). It is common practice to assign students to one of three groups in secondary school; high, average, or low (Irvine, 1991). However, the children and the faculty know the designated course titles assigned to students are not simply the names of the courses, but they carry with them differential expectations concerning students' achievement, behavior, future success, and home life (Irvine, 1991). "The high school curriculum is where tracking is more prevalent and more firmly institutionalized than elementary school" (Irvine, 1991, p. 10).

Significance of the Problem

The dynamics of the K-12 classroom is constantly evolving as educational standards change, new teaching strategies emerge, and the student population becomes more diverse. With this constant evolution, educators have been given the responsibility to make sure each and every student within the classroom setting is acquiring the skills needed to become productive citizens of society. The social and academic development of our nation's students has been the central focus of school, but questions have been raised about the methods utilized to ensure such development is actually taking place. Much discussion has focused on the environments in which students are grouped (Moore & Lewis, 2012). Concerns have been expressed about the type, quality, and rigor of educational curricula students are exposed to as well as the students who make up the

classroom population contributing to the intellectual sharing of ideas. These abovementioned factors have been deemed the most influential in determining academic achievement and social development (Burden, 2003; Slavin, 1987). Moreover, the style of grouping, heterogeneous (mixed ability) or homogenous (ability), has been an underlying issue in providing students with the tools needed to be successful in academia and in the greater society (Adams-Byers, Whitsell, & Moon, 2004).

The practice of placing students in homogeneous groups is one that contributes most to the miseducation and underachievement of Black children (Irvine, 1991). Today the use of tracking is still widespread and continues to separate children by ability (Moore & Lewis, 2012). However, there is a plethora of research evidence that tracking students by ability has limited educational benefit for students (Green, 1999). In fact, tracking is harmful to academic achievement, extracurricular participation, self concept, peer relationships, career aspirations, and motivation (Powell, 2011). Tracking is undesirable because the instructional methods used in low-ability groups have been found to be ineffective and to contribute directly to the disruptive behaviors and low achievement frequently displayed by lower-tracked students (Irvine, 1991).

Although summaries of research on grouping and achievement generally report grouping to have little or no effect on the achievement level of pupils, a large body of research states otherwise (Yates, 1966). It has been found that most research on tracking is purely descriptive (Dahllof, 1971). “Thus whereas we know, or at least believe we know, that grouping has little or no bearing on pupils’ achievement, we do not know why, nor is there any theory that may explain the results of research in this area when compared with studies of other factors, e.g., class size, teacher’s competence, or

programmed instruction" (Dahllof, 1971, p. 3). In light of the abovementioned conclusion drawn from research, supporters of tracking believe the grouping format is not the real issue facing schools (Lockwood, 1996). In fact, it is believed tracking provides students with the best chance to be successful (Lockwood, 1996). Supporters provide the rationale that tracking allows teachers to meet students where they are academically, giving them the knowledge and resources to accommodate struggling students and, in other instances, the space to successfully challenge gifted students without slowing them down by less able learners (Westby-Gibson, 1966). The counter-arguments and sometimes contradictory arguments have made this issue intriguing, enough to consider additional research on the topic of tracking. I believe only through additional research can clarity be brought to the issue of tracking and make clear what has been deemed unknown by previous research findings and conclusions.

Numerous studies have been conducted exploring different aspects of tracking practices prevalent in schools. However, very few studies have ever presented the voices of students within the different education tracks. The student voice component is critical and imperative when discussing ways to improve learning experiences and academic achievement. Researchers lack what is actually going on in the student's mind about their experiences in specific tracked classrooms. If we do not know from their perspective what fosters or hinders learning within the tracking structure, we will not be able to solve the problem. Moreover, this study aims to provide a contribution to the research literature by considering the voices of students in all levels of the tracked format, providing valuable insight to educators and policy makers.

My Story: A Researcher of Tracking

As the researcher of this study, I am a former 7th grade English Language Arts teacher. My decision to become a teacher began many years ago as a middle school student. During that time period I witnessed, what was confusing to me, the clear separation of students of color and White students into standard and advanced level courses. While these standard and advanced courses were not completely one race, there was an evident majority with students of color being highly representative of the standard track courses. In my own 7th grade school year I was placed in standard track courses because I scored less than proficient on the Reading End of Grade Test on my first attempt, despite being an honor roll student. After a retake of the test, I performed well but I was still placed in standard courses because of my less than proficient first attempt. At the end of my 7th grade year I performed well on the Reading End of Grade Test, which granted me access to advance track courses in the 8th grade.

It was not until my 8th grade school year I noticed race was not the only thing different about the standard and advance track courses. The experience in the advanced English Language Arts class was completely different from that of my 7th grade year. My teacher expected much more from students, assigned projects and not worksheets, allowed collaboration between students, and gave students more independence. As I found out, this type of experience was normal for the advance track students. It was an amazing experience for me, which made me feel bad for the students in standard track courses because they were missing out on so much of what school had to offer. I can honestly say I learned more in this environment and actually started to like school so much more.

When I began to teach I was assigned two standard and one advance track English Language Arts courses. The make-up of the two tracks was disheartening as I saw that students of color were over-represented in my standard courses and under-represented in my advanced level course. As communicated to me by administration, these students were grouped according to their Reading End of Grade Test scores. That was not shocking considering I had gone through the same process as a 7th grader. However, I was shocked by the different curricula I was told to teach the separate tracks. Students in my standard track were to get an enormous amount of instructional time dedicated to test preparation, while my advance track students were to be engaged in a variety of rich literature, project-based learning, and assignments that empowered student voice and forced them to think critically. I did not agree with this practice, nor did I conform to it. I taught both tracks in a way that fostered collaboration, critical thinking, independence, student response, and intense reading and writing. This was the only way I believed both groups of students could learn.

In light of the discomfort and dissatisfaction I felt about the tracking practices within my school system, I decided to dedicate my time to earning a master's degree in teaching and pursue a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction. I feel only through an in-depth investigation of the tracking issue and achieving an education at the highest level, I can attain the power and influence to change practices that give students a less than quality education. It is my hope my research on the tracking issue and practical advice through my experiences and the experiences of students will help to reshape how schools position students for success at all levels.

Purpose of the Study

The learning experiences students have in their English courses, positive or negative, are impacted by their track placement (Moore & Lewis, 2012; Oakes, 2005). In large part, these experiences are shaped by various factors that arise as a result of teacher actions. Thus, it is imperative teachers maintain a classroom environment that fosters high expectations, healthy peer relationships, student engagement, and challenges students' intellectual abilities in all English tracks. In doing so, students of diverse backgrounds and academic abilities will receive an education that is equitable and one that will give them the best chance at achieving academic success. Ultimately, all students deserve the same academic opportunities regardless of their track placement.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the classroom learning experiences of eight African American students in three differently tracked English courses. Standard, Honors, and Advanced Placement tracks were the focus of the study. The three research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do African American male high school students describe teacher expectations within their English course?
2. How do African American male high school students describe their relationships with other students within their English course?
3. How do African American male high school students describe the academic experience within their English course?

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural Theory

This study's implications of the learning experience within the English classroom were deeply rooted in sociocultural theory. In this theory, literacy develops through relationships within social practices, across locations, and is expressed and refined through participants' references to specific social histories, tacit knowledge, and opportunities for problem-solving (Moje & Lewis, 2007). The context of this study will focus on Vygotsky's three principles of sociocultural theory explaining relationships among language, learning, and society (Vygotsky, 1978). The three principles indicate: (a) thought is mediated by social, historical relations and activity, (b) the potential to learn is optimal within situations where a problem makes use of and extends the language, knowledge, motivation and relationships already available to learners, and (c) language and other sign systems are historically and culturally developed through social interaction but become available for individuals as a form of inner control over immediate and future activity (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's first principle of sociocultural theory focuses on the concept of mediation and the historically formed social activities that lend meaning, materials, and direction to conceptual understanding. The second principle builds on an understanding of mediation but focuses on the specific site and mechanism of teaching and learning as a zone of proximal development, a site for problem solving with others. "The zone of proximal development requires transformation of language, signs, and tools so that tacit knowledge are extended and made explicit for new learning" (Enciso & Ryan, 2011, p. 133). The third principle positions language as the most valuable mediating resource or

sign for learning which is mediated by the historical and political meanings circulating within social situations and societies.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory came into existence in the 1970s with the works of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman in efforts to battle the more subtle, but just as deeply entrenched, varieties of racism in the United States (Green, 1999). The basic tenant of Critical Race Theory is that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society (Delgado, 1995). (Ladson-Billings, 2003) asserts because racism is an ingrained feature of our society, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. "Critical Race Theory's challenge to racial oppression and the status quo sometimes takes the form of storytelling, in which writers analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and what invariably render people of color one-down" (Delgado, 1995, p. 1). Critical Race Theory also holds the concept of interest-convergence, an idea that White elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks only when they also promote White self-interest (Delgado, 1995). Further, it examines the way racism is made invisible through the curriculum, participation in the profession, and its policies (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Critical Race Theory was inseparable from this research study, as it is a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequities African American males experience within the realm of the classroom. More specifically, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are exemplars of the relationship that exists between Critical Race Theory and education (Ladson-Billings, 1999). This theory views the school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact to maintain a White supremacist master script (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Master

scripting silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, White, upper-class culture as the "standard" knowledge students need to know (Swartz, 1992). Thus, "content that does not reflect the dominant voice must be brought under control, mastered, and then reshaped before it can become part of the master script" (Swartz, 1992, p.341). In addition, the rigor of the curriculum and access to what is deemed enriched via courses and classes for the gifted and talented are considered in this theory, for the curriculum advance track White students follow emphasizes critical thinking, reasoning, and logic whereas low track students of color experience a curriculum that does not emphasize those abovementioned skills (Kozol, 1991). Moreover, Critical Race Theory suggests current instructional strategies presume African American students are deficient, removing any instructional accountability for the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1999). When implemented instructional strategies do not achieve desired results, the students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Consequently, "in the classroom, a dysfunctional curriculum coupled with a lack of instructional innovation adds up to poor performance on traditional assessment measures" (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p.23).

Interpretivist Paradigm

This study was also based on the interpretivist paradigm. The goal of this paradigm is to understand human ideas, actions, and interactions in specific contexts or in terms of the wider culture. The ontological belief of Interpretivism portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing (Glesne, 2011). In this paradigm, it is critical to know how people interpret and make meaning of some object, event, action, or perception. With the research goal of interpreting the social world from

the lens of those in it, Interpretivism follows the research methods include interacting with people in their social contexts and talking with them about their perceptions (Glesne, 2011). From this theoretical perspective, research designs focus on in-depth, long term interactions with relevant people in one or several sites. In this study, the abovementioned paradigm guided the research in understanding the experience of eight African American students in the context of their English track placements. Table 1 shows how the research questions align with the theoretical frameworks.

Table1: Research questions and theoretical frameworks

Research Questions	Theoretical Framework
How do African American male high school students describe teacher expectations within their English course?	Critical Race Interpretivist
How do African American male high school students describe their relationships with other students within their English course?	Critical Race Sociocultural Interpretivist
How do African American male high school students describe the academic experience within their English course?	Critical Race Sociocultural Interpretivist

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Tracking involves the division of students of similar educational levels into groups to receive instruction according to different curricula (Irvine, 1991). Grouping students into educational tracks began many years ago to accommodate a societal class structure in which students had predetermined careers. Tracking was introduced as a system of meritocracy, with the students of superior abilities rising to the top of their classes (Green, 1999). In this system, students were not considered equal nor did they receive an equal education. According to reformers, not every child needed to study classical literature and Latin if factory work was his destiny (Powell, 1991). Various educational curriculums designed specifically for certain groups of students were strictly enforced. Tracking provided advanced students with the tools and resources needed for college entrance and emphasized vocational training for the slower pupils (Green, 1999). An excellent education was neither promised nor attainable for all students.

Unfortunately, this outdated educational reform tracking system is still prevalent within our nation's school systems (Oakes, 2005). Students are being grouped homogenously and are receiving specialized curriculums that have serious implications for their future. "Homogenous ability grouping, or tracking as it is commonly called, has been the norm in most levels of schooling for many years" (Powell, 2011, p.143). This has allowed the learning opportunities and instruction schools expose students to set the boundaries for student experiences and achievement (Moore & Lewis, 2012).

History of Tracking

Before the late 1800s, only children from high socio-economic status attended secondary school (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). "As the end of the century neared, the children of the middle class joined the elite in applying and sometimes enrolling in institutions of higher learning, leading to the first push for schools to help sort and select students for higher education as well as to prepare for it" (Oakes, 1985, p. 18). This effort came in 1892 when the National Education Association (NEA) requested the Committee of Ten on Secondary Studies to provide recommendations for standardizing college admission requirements, as well as secondary and college curriculum preparation (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). They recommended secondary schools offer four different curriculums that would each be suitable for college admission, rather than offer college preparation to some and less academic programs to others (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). However, "the committee's recommendations fell by the wayside as sociocultural and economic issues forced radical changes in the focuses of educational policy" (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009, p. 222).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a variety of national polices contributed to a population boom of students in public schools (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). The increase of immigrants due to the rise in industrialization and slaves making the transition to free status opened the landscape of education (Donelan, Neal, & Jones, 1994). Secondary schools were comprised of students whose behavior, language, and experiences were vastly different from those of students of the previous century (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Consequently, comprehensive

and public schools began to be marked by the separation of students into groups because of their distinct needs and abilities for differentiated instruction (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). The rationale was to meet the needs of the various social classes in the country while contributing to the industrialized economy (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Unfortunately, the mission of equal education for certain children and opportunity fell by the wayside. Differences in education were now seen as being openly based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009).

In 1905, special education became an educational focus and Simone Binet developed an IQ test to identify students in need of the additional services (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). In 1920, after being used mostly on immigrants, there was a push to test every child in the United States (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). "Educators used scores as a means to sort students into classes that best reflected what was believed at the time to be their proper station in life" (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009, p. 222). Scores on the IQ test were deemed an effective predictor of students' capacity to learn, forcing teachers to adjust instruction to meet the needs of the diverse learners (Boyer, 1936). "IQ test became a prominent tool for assessment, placement, and instructional decisions in U.S. schools (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009, p. 222). However, an evaluation of the test would suggest that it was geared toward middle and upper class students of eastern European descent (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). As a result, students of other ethnicities and social classes performed poorly in relation to their European counterparts (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Poor results of non-

European lower-class students provided the rationale for separating students of color, immigrants, and the poor into programs that would best prepare them for skilled labor, reserving college preparatory programs for those identified as more intellectually able (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009).

The late 1960s saw a shift in the educational structure as public school systems began to move away from school wide tracking systems, in which track placement determined all courses students took (Lucas, 1999). This shift was, in part, a reaction to the uproar about the questionable equality of educational practices made available to all students within the tracking structure (Green, 1999). "Even after the system was dismantled, the same labels applied to tracks (e.g., honors, regular, and basic) were applied to individual courses; thus, the foundational element of tracking, the differentiated curriculum, remained" (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009, p. 222). However, non-supporters of tracking resisted the continued implementation of the grouping format which they believed provided students with inequitable educational access and opportunity (Green, 1999).

The 1960s and 1970s were characterized by litigation focused on the issue of tracking due to the growing support for equal access and educational opportunity (Green, 1999). "Cases such as *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967), *Moses v. Washington Parish School Board* (1972), *McNeal v. Tate County School District* (1975) challenged the policies and practices of tracking" (Green, 1999, p. 241). In each case, it was argued that tracking and ability grouping resulted in intra-school segregation (Green, 1999).

Court case, *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967), was the first legal proceeding to address tracking in public schools (Green, 1999). The lawsuit was filed because Washington

D.C.'s dual system of education was alleged to have perpetuated the segregation of students (Green, 1999). In Washington D.C.'s school system, African Americans were disproportionately represented in vocational and lower academic tracks (Green, 1999). Based on a combination of standardized tests and teacher recommendations, students were classified into ability groups (Green, 1999). Although Superintendent Carl Hansen argued student placements were based solely on students' abilities and educational needs, the courts disagreed (Green, 1999). "The court ruled that the track system unconstitutionally deprived African American and poor school children of their equal right to equal education opportunity with White and more affluent public school children" (*Hobson v. Hansen*, 1967, p. 401). The court deemed Washington D.C.'s dual system as undemocratic and discriminatory as Superintendent Hansen admitted it was designed to prepare some children for white-collar and other children for blue collar jobs (Green, 1999). The court's decision was based on the findings that African American students were assigned to lower tracks at a much greater rate than whites and children placed in lower tracks did not receive the same educational opportunities provided to children in higher track placements (Oakes, 1985).

Moses v. Washington Parish School Board (1972) was another significant case in legal action on the issue of tracking (Green, 1999). As a result of mandates to desegregate, Washington Parish School Board adopted and implemented a plan to ability group students in Louisiana based on IQ tests (Green, 1999). "The plaintiffs charged that the use of IQ tests to determine track placement undermined the educational ability of African American students who had previously been educated in segregated schools" (Green, 1999, p. 242). Specifically, the cultural bias evident in the tests disadvantaged

African Americans in comparison to their White counterparts because of the differential qualities of education both groups had received (Moses v. Washington Parish School Board, 1972). The court sided with the plaintiffs, citing the use of standardized tests for the purposes of classification deprived African American students of their constitutional rights (Green, 1999). It was ordered the district terminate its use of the track system because it resulted in a segregated student body, ultimately violating the Fourteenth Amendment (Green, 1999). "According to the court, homogeneous grouping was educationally detrimental to students assigned to lower tracks, and African Americans constituted a disproportionate number of the students in these lower tracks" (Green, 1999, p. 243).

McNeal v. Tate County School District (1975) was another case based on the alleged unlawful use of IQ tests to group students (Green, 1999). In this case, "the court ruled testing could not be used to determine track placement in a desegregated school system until a district had remedied the results of de jure segregation and achieved unitary status" (Green, 1999, p.243). This provision was deemed necessary by the court to ensure the assignment of students was not based on the present results of past segregation (Green, 1999). Unlike previous court rulings, the court upheld the validity of tracking as district policy and suggested that ability grouping was a non-racial method of student assignment which should not be constitutionally forbidden (*McNeal v. Tate County School District*, 1975). More specifically, the courts ruled districts should be and are free to use ability grouping whenever it does not have a racially discriminatory effect (*McNeal v. Tate County School District*, 1975). "The Fifth Circuit's decision left open the possibility of segregation in public education might be constitutionally permissible"

(Green, 1999, p. 244). In brief, as long as the segregation is a de facto outcome rather than an explicit goal of district policies, schools may legally continue to classify and group students by race (Green, 1999).

Moving forward, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a judicial retreat from equal access and educational opportunities for students of color, ultimately deferring judgment to school officials who employed tracking and ability grouping policies and practices (Green, 1999). The increasingly conservative nature of the judicial system made the prospect of the elimination of tracking unlikely (Green, 1999). Consequently, educational policy makers, administrators, teachers, and parents were unlikely to voluntarily initiate a policy retreat against tracking because of a lack of support (Green, 1999). "Unfortunately, even where schools have been desegregated system-wide, tracking and ability grouping continue to segregate public school students along racial lines" (Green, 1999, p. 247).

The Case for Tracking

Research has indicated that advocates for tracking believe it helps schools meet the various needs of a diverse population (Oaks, 1985). It is assumed that tracking provides low-achieving students with the attention and slower pace they require and advanced students with the appropriate challenge needed to accelerate their learning (Powell, 2011). Low achievers "are less likely to feel inferior, since they no longer have to compete with higher achievers" (Green, 1999, p.239). Tracking has been cited as a format to individualize instruction as well as a preventative measure to avoid low-achievers from hindering the progress of their advanced counterparts (Powell, 2011). Tracking supporters claim students learn more effectively when they are grouped with

others at the same academic level (Green, 1999.). Moreover, proponents of tracking believe it is essential because individuals model themselves after people they perceive to be of similar ability, not those they believe to possess more advanced abilities (Schunk, 1987). Research suggests student behaviors that are considered to be socially immature are often the result of the frustrations they experience when forced to function in a classroom environment that is not compatible with their abilities, specialized interests, and developmental levels (Adams-Byers, Whitsell, & Moon, 2004). In addition, there are social and emotional disadvantages associated with mixed ability grouping that heavily impact high ability students. The disadvantages of having high ability students in mixed ability classrooms include teasing and bullying by peers (Moon, Nelson, & Piercy, 1993). Tracking minimizes the social disadvantages that come along with mixing students with diverse needs and abilities.

The Case against Tracking

"Several decades after hundreds of research studies pronounced tracking harmful to students in low tracks and levels, the practice appears to be thriving at all levels of schooling" (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009, p. 222). Research suggests homogeneous grouping does not consistently help anyone learn better and the learning of average and slow students is negatively affected by homogeneous placement (Oakes, 1985). Negative academic outcomes can be attributed to the descriptions of instruction, materials, teacher actions and expectations, and classroom interactions in ability groups and tracks in secondary schools (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). In fact, the practice of placing students in homogeneous groups is one educational practice that contributes most to the miseducation and underachievement of Black children

(Irvine, 1991). Although operated with the intent to create an efficient means of meeting the needs of a diverse population, one consequence of tracking is that students are often assigned and labeled into advanced or remedial levels of instruction (Oakes, 1995). This is problematic because ability is not always the criterion for a tracked system; labels often relate to race and socioeconomic status and are often utilized to divide students in school (Green, 1999). Opponents of tracking stress the system is detrimental to peer-relationships and is harmful to the self-esteem of low achievers (Powell, 2011). Tracking has been designed in a way in which high achievers reap the greatest educational benefits. Students of color in lower academic tracks receive a condensed curriculum which barely prepares them for life. "Students in higher tracks cover more academic material, explore issues in greater depth, conceptualize problems, interact more meaningfully with teachers, and receive higher quality instruction than do students in lower tracks" (Green, 1999, p.239). This division of rigorous learning, exploration of concepts, and the building of relationships within the different tracks make it challenging for students in lower tracks to take advantage of their education when the proper tools are not given such as a rigorous curriculum, up-to-date academic resources, and a qualified teacher who believes in them. The separation of students into these tracking structures eventually become apparent and consequently students gain a negative interpretation of their educational experience (Moore & Lewis, 2012).

There are strong connections among ability grouping, social class, and the development of social perceptions (Irvine, 1991). Students in advanced classes and gifted and talented programs are more than three times more likely to come from wealthier communities than from low socio-economic status (Powell, 2011). The tracking structure

fosters class and racial inequities, grouping selection is often biased, misrepresentative assumptions about intelligence are created, and the least capable teachers to serve the non-gifted students are typically assigned to the low-achieving classes (Powell, 2011). Simply, a quality education is often reserved for those who are privileged and of middle to high socioeconomic status. Tracking creates segregation within schools and perpetuates a system where students receive an unequal education. "A number of education researchers have argued that tracking results in differential access to curriculum and instruction among racial groups, denying African Americans and other children of color in lower tracks equal educational opportunity" (Green, 1999, p. 232). Tracking, as research indicates, has created "large disparities in the type, quality, and rigor of educational curricula students are exposed to, as well as contributing to the academic achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students" (Moore & Lewis, 2012, p.106). Segregation due to tracking is disguised by the fact that schools accept students of all races and socio-economic levels. However, tracking systems allow for the separation of races into specific homogeneous classes aligning students to different educational tracks. Students begin to associate tracking levels with race and academic ability, which in turn, shapes peer interactions and their sense of efficacy (Moore & Lewis, 2012). These tracking structures have been deemed the result of school ignorance and not solely because of a student's academic ability or decisions to create such educational pathways. Educational institutions create and sustain structures that produce racial separation (Moore & Lewis, 2012). Consequently, negative mindsets are often produced about peers, education, and the greater society.

The quality of teaching varies between educational tracks that students are offered (Powell, 2011; Moore & Lewis, 2012). "Teachers with more professional experience tend to be assigned to higher academic tracks, leaving less-experienced teachers to deal with students who need the most help" (Green, 1999, p.240). Teachers placed in lower academic tracks are found to have shorter interactions and lower expectations for their students; consequently, behavioral issues tend to arise in lower track classes because of the communicated low expectations from instructors (Irvine, 1991). Teacher actions, the classroom environment, and school policies influence student learning and classroom behaviors. Students in low tracks often exhibit disruptive behavior because the classroom environment lacks high achieving academic role models; not only are these students missing out on quality discussions and group activities, but they do not get to see appropriate classroom behavior modeled within their educational experience (Green, 1999).

The Tracked English Classroom

Studies on tracking have found distinct differences between high and low track classes on a number of dimensions, including curriculum, classroom interactions, and teacher expectations for students' thinking and behavior (Alexander et al., 1978; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Mehan, 1979; Oakes, 1995). Specifically in an English classroom, "the learning opportunities students experience shape the literacy capacities they develop; these opportunities also shape students' conceptions of the academic disciplines in which these capacities are used" (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001).

Content

Research has found in high track English classes students study and analyze literature and write long, complex expository prose (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Critical thinking that includes evaluation, synthesis, and problem solving are often characteristic of high track classes; with classroom interactions encompassing more discussion, authentic questions, and more student participation than lower English tracks (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). In addition, advance track English classes are often taught by skilled and experienced teachers, whose instruction is more likely to be fast paced, coherent, and engaging (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009).

In contrast to advance track English courses, instruction in low tracks is found to focus on standardized achievement test preparation (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Content difficulty is more likely to be delivered in the form of basic literacy skills within disembodied reading and writing tasks, and simple, low level texts (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). Students' writing is often limited to answering questions in workbooks and writing short paragraphs about teacher chosen topics (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). In addition, academic tasks usually require mainly rote learning and deductive thinking (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). The instruction proceeds at a slower pace, and the classroom discourse is often characterized by known-answer questions and teacher dominated talk (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000; Mehan, 1979).

Tracking and Student-Teacher Relationships

The differential treatment and expectations of students in differential groups, tracks, and levels have immediate and long term consequences for students' academic,

social, and emotional growth (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). The learning opportunities teachers are able or willing to create in classrooms are affected by, in many cases, their perceptions of the characteristics of the groups of students they encounter (Oakes, 2005). On the other hand, students' perceptions of how concerned their teachers are about them have lead researchers to believe that trusting relations are far more likely in high track classes than in low (Oakes, 2005). High levels of punitive action imply that trusting relations rarely exist in classes where punishment is relied upon to coerce students into compliance (Oakes, 2005). "A higher degree of punitiveness, a lower degree of trusting relationships, and less involvement in class activities are related to lower educational outcomes and are more associated with low-track class" (Oakes, 2005, p. 132). Teachers of higher track classes often expect sophisticated thinking, active participation, independent learning, and creativity (Oakes, 2005). In contrast, teacher's goals for lower track students focus more on behavior than on learning (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). "Teachers in low tracks are more likely to emphasize student conformity: students getting along with one another, working quietly, improving study habits, being punctual, and conforming to classroom rules and expectations" (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009, p. 223). Ultimately, the relationships students have with their teachers as well as the expectations of the teacher often influence both students' understanding of what is to be done and their attending to it (Oakes, 2005). "Relationships influence learning and how student involvement with and time spent in learning activities are mediated by the relationship of teachers and students" (Oakes, 2005, p. 131).

Tracking and Student-Peer Relationships

Considerable differences are found in the quality of relationships and type of student involvement with characteristics of high and low track classes (Oakes, 2005). Differences in the relationship and involvement dimensions of classrooms are consistent with the different kinds of socialization researchers suggest take place in classrooms (Oakes, 2005). The characteristics of classrooms in which students learn more include warm and positive relationships, task orientation, and student involvement, all characteristic of high track classes more so than low (Oakes, 2005). When student relationships with one another are considered as an important factor in creating a trusting environment where everyone works on a common project for learning, there are large discrepancies among track level (Oakes, 2005). "Trust, cooperation, and even good will among students are far less characteristic of low track classes than of high" (Oakes, 2005, p. 132). "High track classes tend to be more characterized by a greater frequency of active learning activities and more on task behavior in the classroom as well as a considerably higher level of student involvement as students perceive it than are low track groups" (Oakes, 2005, 133).

Implications for Students in Lower Tracks

Research reveals White students are more often admitted to accelerated courses and programs, whereas African Americans and Latinos are relegated to inferior courses and low tracks when warranted or not (Green, 1999). The division of students into high and low tracks sets the stage for the achievement gap and a future of imbalanced opportunities between racial groups. Tracking enforces the bias and stigma of segregation, making the benefits of intra-school desegregation unattainable (Green,

1999). Consequently, students will see the world as a place where their opportunities only extend to the basis of their race and abilities, as measured by their schooling experience. "Tracking inevitably produces educational winners and losers, as teachers often place African Americans in lower tracks at a much higher rate than white students" (Green, 1999, p. 240). Students of color are forced to learn and create their own futures of success through an educational experience of limited resources and low expectations. Black students are more than twice as likely to be placed into low educational tracks as their White counterparts (Green, 1999). The advanced reap the highest educational benefits while the lower track students sit and wait on a future of uncertainty.

Children placed in lower educational tracks are severely limited in their employment and educational opportunities after high school (Green, 1999). This serves as an explanation for the high percentage of students of color placed on public assistance and in the justice system post secondary school. "Students assigned to lower tracks are disadvantaged in comparison to higher track students, in their prospects for completing high school, attending college, and securing high-status jobs" (Green, 1999, p. 241). The variety of educational tracks offered within school systems may prepare students to graduate from high school, but that does not necessarily prepare them for a rich and productive life. It is essential to provide students with the tools needed to go beyond high school. Some educational tracks offered are not suitable for a student to be considered for postsecondary education. As research reveals, postsecondary education provides access to occupations across the country, while workers with a high school diploma or less are largely limited to occupational fields that are either declining or pay low wages (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010). Thus, it is imperative for schools to put their students

on a path to college, giving them a chance to compete in an economy that requires much from the people that live within its boundaries. Within a tracked system, all students are not afforded an equal chance at a quality future (Moore & Lewis, 2012).

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will focus primarily on a description of the study's methodology. The early stages of the chapter will cover the research design and review the research purpose and questions. An explanation of my role as the researcher will be conveyed as well as a description of the research context, giving details of the study's setting, participants, and length. Next, the procedures for data collection and analysis will be described followed by an examination of the framework for analysis. The chapter will conclude with a section on the trustworthiness of the research and a summary of the study's methodology.

"Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). The key assumption of qualitative research is based on the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, this form of research strives to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there (Patton, 1985). The key concern in qualitative research is to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participant's perspectives, not the researcher's (Merriam, 1998). Several common characteristics of this research method are: the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; fieldwork is usually involved; and it primarily employs an inductive research strategy (Merriam, 1998). Most

importantly, since qualitative research revolves around process, meaning, and understanding, the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998). The researcher often strives for a holistic account to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study, identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation (Creswell, 2013). Finally, "the final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution of the literature or call for change" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44).

The qualitative research design was chosen for this study because I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the learning experiences from the perspective of African American males within differently tracked English courses. Given my experiences as a student and teacher, the literature on tracking, and the documented achievement of African American males, I felt compelled to do further research within standard, honors, and advance placement tracks to understand what fostered or hindered learning for this group of students. In particular, I wanted to explore how these students described the teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic demands of their English track placements. Ultimately, the established research questions suggested a qualitative approach.

Case Study Design

"Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). This design typically gathers

data through participant observations, in-depth interviews, and document collection and analysis (Glesne, 2011). The case study approach is closely identified and defined by its features of being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. The particularistic feature of this research design comes from the focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon. From a descriptive standpoint, the end product of a case study is rich in nature, producing thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study. Finally, the heuristic feature enhances the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study. This feature brings about the discovery of new meaning, extends the reader's experience, or confirms what is known (Merriam, 1998).

"A case study might be selected for its very uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to" (Merriam, 1998, p. 33). The aforementioned statement is why the case study design was chosen for this particular study, to reveal the classroom experiences of eight African American students through their own unique voices. The bounded nature of the study to the classroom experiences of these eight students is what made the case study approach appropriate for this research. The following were the research questions that guided the study:

1. How do African American male high school students describe teacher expectations within their English course?
2. How do African American male high school students describe their relationships with other students within their English course?
3. How do African American male high school students describe the academic experience within their English course?

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is contingent on the question(s) being investigated, the context of the study, and the theoretical perspective (Glesne, 2011). For the purposes of this study, I acted as an outside observer. From this perspective, "the researcher is an outsider of the group under study, watching and taking field notes from a distance" (Creswell, 2013, p. 167). Furthermore, the researcher has some interaction with the study participants, but not an overwhelming amount (Glesne, 2011). In this study, I occasionally interacted with students and teachers, but for the most part, I took notes from the back of the participants' classrooms. "Through being a part of the social setting, the researcher learns firsthand how the actions of research participants correspond to their words; see patterns of behavior; experience the unexpected, as well as the expected; and develop a quality of trust, relationship, and obligation with others in the setting" (Glesne, 2011, p. 63). Although participant observation ideally continues throughout the period of data collection, it is particularly essential in the early stages of the research because of its role in informing the researcher about appropriate areas of investigation and in developing a sound researcher-researched relationship (Glesne, 2011). Ultimately, I was a key instrument for the study. My responsibilities as the researcher were to collect data through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants.

I am intrigued by the ways in which African American male students describe their experiences within differently tracked English courses. More specifically, I am interested in their descriptions of teacher expectations, peer-student relationships, and academic experience in their English track placements. From this study, I was able to bring awareness to the differentiated experiences students have in schools based on their

track placements and how these placements affect students' outlook on learning. I also examined what fostered or hindered learning for these particular students based on their classroom dynamics. Ultimately, my contribution to the literature considers the voices of students in all levels of the tracked format, providing valuable insight to educators and policy makers.

Research Context

The study took place at a high school located in western North Carolina. The city has a population of 44, 359. The population is 68% White, 20% African American, and 12% Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The average income is $20,482 with a median household income of $39, 275 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The population consists of 20.8% of persons below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, 79% of the population has obtained a high school diploma or higher degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The school of study, Southwest High, offers ninth through 12th grades and has a population of 1,431 students (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011). The school was selected out of convenience, for it is one in which the University of North Carolina at Charlotte has close relations. In a sense, I conducted backyard research. I have relatively easy access to the district, established rapport with the principal, and the amount of time and money needed for various research steps were minimal. More importantly, the site was chosen because it offers the three necessary English tracks the study demands: Standard, Honors, and Advance Placement. In addition, the high school population is 31.1% Black and 53.6% of that population is composed of males (Civil Rights Data

Collection, 2011). The high population of African American male students allowed me to have access to the participants needed to satisfy the study requirements.

Eight African American students enrolled in three different levels of English were the participants of the study. These participants were classified as freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. These students were the focus of the study because research has well documented the underachievement of African American students in English as well as the differentiated instruction these students receive in varying education tracks. Through these participants, I used their responses to better understand what was hindering or fostering success within each English track. This study used purposeful sampling, a selection process where the participants were purposefully chosen because they could inform the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2013). Within each track, I selected two to three African American male students. I selected students who displayed interesting behavior characteristics within their English tracks. I selected students that were engaged, disengaged, outspoken, and quiet within their English tracks. The selection of students with varying characteristics allowed the study to capture rich data during the data collection process. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Students were invited to participate in the study after IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval had been attained. Students that agreed to participate in the study were required to permit to the study as well as attain parental consent if under 18. Students that did not actively participate in the study did not need to provide consent since they were not a part of the data collection process. Table 2 shows student participant information and Table 3 shows teacher participant information.

Table 2: Student participants

Student	Track	Grade	Race	Extracurricular Activities
Sam	Standard	9	African American	None
Sean	Standard	9	African American	None
Scott	Standard	9	African American	JV Football
Harrison	Honors	10	African American	JV Basketball
Henry	Honors	10	African American	JV Basketball JV Football
Howard	Honors	10	African American	None
Andrew	AP Language	11	African American	Varsity Football Baseball Beta Club ROTC
Anthony	AP Literature	12	African American	Varsity Football Track National Honors Society Beta Club

Table 3: Teacher participants

Teacher	Track/Grade	Race/Age	High School Experience	Degrees Certifications
Mrs. Smith	Stand. Eng. I 9th	White Early 30s	2 Years	BA in Education
Mr. Harris	Honors Eng. II 10th	White Late 50s	8 Years	Teacher Certification
Mrs. Allison	Advance Placement Language 11th	White Early 30s	11 Years	BA in Education Masters in Secondary English Education National Board Certified AP Language Certified
Mrs. Anderson	Advance Placement Literature 12th	White Late 50s	12 Years	BA in English AP Language Certified AP Literature Certified

This study took place over the course of eight weeks. For the first two weeks of the study, I observed the classroom dynamics of each English track while paying close attention to the African American males within each course. The first two weeks also included the recruitment of research participants. I chose eight participants for the data collection purposes of the study, three students from the Standard and Honors track and two students from the Advance Placement track. During week three, students were required to get consent from parents and sign an assent form for participation in the study. Week four was designated for the first round of initial interviews from each participant and their teachers. Weeks five and six were dedicated to ongoing classroom observations. Data collection concluded on week seven with final participant interviews. Week eight consisted of interview follow-up and member checking of the participants. Using observation and interview data collection methods, the study documented how participants described their learning experiences within their English track placements, focusing on teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth interviews and observations were utilized as the primary data collection methods of this study. The data collection techniques were designed to generate the data needed to answer the established research questions. Observations were conducted throughout the study and were used to record the dynamics of each English track as well as to choose participants to interview. I took field notes to document the interactions that occurred during classroom observations. Individual interviews with each participant were administered two times during the study. Data collection tools are in Tables 4,6, and 6.

Table 4: Classroom observation guide

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION GUIDE	
Focus of Observation	**Possible Questions for Observation**
The Physical Setting	What is the physical environment of the classroom? How are students seated? What objects, resources, and technologies are in the setting?
The Participants	Who is in the classroom, in terms of gender, ethnicity and other demographic factors, and what are their roles? What are the characteristics of the participants? What brings these people together? Who is or is not allowed to be here?
Curriculum & Learning Content	What is presented as the core content or target skills in the class?
Instruction/Activities	What is taking place? Is there a sequence of activities? How much time is allocated for each activity? What norms or rules structure activities and interactions?
Interaction Between Instructor & Students	How does the instructor lead the class? How does the instructor interact with students? Who has most interactions with the instructor? Who has least interactions with the instructor? What norms and rules structure the interaction between the instructor and students?
Interaction Among Students	When and how do students interact with each other? Who is the core element that sustains the student interaction? What is the common structure of student interaction? (Pair or small group?) Who are most active in interacting with other students? Who are least active in interacting with other students? What norms and rules structure student interaction?
Subtle Factors	What kinds of informal and unplanned activities occur? What are the symbolic and connotative meanings or words used in the setting? What does ***not*** happen?

Table 5: Student interview questions

Student Interview Questions
Establishing Rapport 1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. 2. Tell me about your high school experience. 3. Overall, how are your classes going so far? **General Course Questions** 1. Talk to me about your English class. 2. How are things going in that class? 3. How would you describe your experiences there? **What kind of teacher expectations do the students experience in their English class?** 1. Tell me what kind of student your teacher expects you to be in class. 2. Tell me about the quality of work your teacher expects from you. 3. To what extent does your teacher want you to explain your answers when you are asked a question? 4. How quickly does your teacher help you when you are struggling with a task? Explain. **What kind of student-peer relationships do the students experience in their English class?** 1. Tell me about your classmates. 2. Describe how well you and your classmates work together. 3. Do you feel like your classmates are highly motivated to do good work in your English class? 4. Tell me about the level of motivation you and your classmates give each other when completing an assignment. 5. To what extent do you and your classmates depend on each other to complete assignments? 6. Tell me about any problems or trouble you've had with your classmates. 7. Describe how issues are solved between you and your classmates. 8. To what extent do you feel connected to your classmates beyond the daily requirements of your English class? **What kind of academic experience do the students have in their English classes?** 1. Describe the usual assignments your teacher gives you in class. 2. Tell me about the most challenging assignment that you've had to complete in your English class. 3. How often does your teacher request answers to questions that only have one right answer? More than one right answer? 4. To what extent do you have to look to other sources to get answers to problems? 5. Describe the extent to which your teacher allows you to struggle before guiding you to the right answer? **Closing** 1. What do you think should remain the same in your class? 2. What do you think should be changed about your class? 3. What do you think this course should have included that was not included; or, what was missing? 4. What other comments or suggestions do you have?

Table 6: Teacher interview questions

Teacher Interview Questions
Establishing Rapport 1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. 2. Tell me about your teaching experience. 3. Overall, how are your classes going so far? **What kind of teacher expectations do the students experience in their English class?** 1. What are your expectations for students in your class? 2. Tell me about the quality of work you expect from students. 3. To what extent do you want students to explain their answers when you ask a question? 4. How quickly do you help students when they are struggling with a task? Explain. **What kind of student-peer relationships do the students experience in their English class?** 1. Tell me about your students. 2. Describe how well your students work together. 3. Do you feel like your students are highly motivated to do good work in your English class? 4. Tell me about the level of motivation your students give each other when completing an assignment. 5. To what extent do your students depend on each other to complete assignments? 6. Tell me about any problems or trouble your students have had with each other. 7. Describe how issues are resolved between students in your class. 8. To what extent do you feel that your students are connected beyond the daily requirements of your English class? **What kind of academic experience do the students have in their English classes?** 1. Describe the usual assignments you give students in your class. 2. Tell me about the most challenging assignment you've had students complete in your English class. 3. How often do you request answers to questions that only have one right answer? More than one right answer? 4. How often do you give students assignments in which they have to look to other sources to get answers to problems? 5. Describe the extent to which you allow students to struggle before guiding them to the right answer? **Closing** 1. What do you think should remain the same about your class? 2. What do you think should be changed about your class? 3. What do you think this course should have included that was not included; or, what was missing? 4. What other comments do you have?

"One of the most important sources of case study information is the interview" (Yin, 1994, p. 84). The person to person encounter in which one person elicits information from another is the most common form of interview (Merriam, 1998). Researchers interview participants to find out those things that cannot be directly observed such as, feelings, thoughts, and intentions (Merriam, 1998). Interviewing is among the best techniques to use when conducting intense case studies of a few selected individuals (Merriam, 1998). "In conventional approaches, researchers ask questions in the context of purposes often important primarily to themselves" (Glesne, 2011, p. 102). As a result, participants respond in the context of dispositions (motives, values, concerns, needs) researchers need to unravel in order to make sense out of the words their questions generate (Glesne, 2011). Interviews may take on a structured form in which questions are established before the interviewing begins and remain unchanged throughout the interview (Glesne, 2011). In other cases, interviews may take on a semi-structured form. During this type of interview, questions may emerge in the course of the interviewing and may add to or replace pre-established ones (Glesne, 2011). "Hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions can be used to elicit good data, while multiple and leading questions, as well as questions yielding yes and no answers, should be avoided" (Merriam, 1998, p. 93). Asking good questions is essential to getting meaningful data. "The opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry" (Glesne, 2011, p. 104).

Interviews were instrumental in obtaining information to help answer the research questions that guided this study. Data were used as evidence to document how African

American males in differently tracked English courses described their experiences. Through the interviews, students conveyed their thoughts and feelings on the many aspects of their English course. Specifically, I strived to find out how the participants described teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and their academic experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this study in which if additional questions emerged during the interview, they were asked along with the pre-established interview questions. The interview data collection process consisted of deciding on interview questions, identifying interviewees, determining the type of interview, recording the procedures, designing and using an interview protocol, refining the interview questions and procedures, determining the place for conducting the interview, obtaining consent, conducting and recording the interview, and transcribing the interview for future analysis.

As interviews are essential to qualitative inquiry, observations offer another important element to qualitative research. There are two distinct ways in which observations can be distinguished from interviews. Observations take place in the natural field setting and the data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account obtained in an interview (Merriam, 1998). More specifically, an observation is the act of noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer, often with an instrument, and recording it for scientific purposes (Creswell, 2013). Observations are based on the study's established purpose and research questions (Creswell, 2013). In addition, they may include a multitude of things. The researcher may observe the physical setting, participants, activities, interactions, conversations, and their own behaviors during the observation (Creswell, 2013). The tool of collecting data is important because it provides some knowledge of the context and

provides specific incidents and behaviors that can be used as reference points for subsequent interviews (Merriam, 1998).

Phase I: Planning

I began the first phase of this study almost a year ago. While conversations of tracking were deeply rooted from my prior experiences before I began my doctoral program, the actual planning of this research did not begin until I took my first qualitative research course during the Fall 2013 semester. I wrestled with several research scenarios until I came up with a study that was not just intriguing to me, but to my colleagues as well. The conversations I had with my peers boosted my confidence to bring the research specifics to my mentor, now dissertation chair, for feedback. He was instrumental in helping me shape my ideas in a way that would make for a study that was rich in data for the purposes of the research. As a result of the meetings I had with my chair, I was able to create a sound study with a clearly defined purpose, aligned research questions, and methods for collecting and analyzing data. Our discussions illuminated and perfected the rawness of my plans for research. Together we were able to assemble a strong team of faculty members that would soon become my dissertation committee. Details of my study will be further communicated in the next section.

Phase II: Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began Phase II of the study. As I sought to uncover the answers to my research questions, I collected data through observations and interviews during the eight week study. With the abovementioned data collection tools, I was able to get participants to reveal descriptions

of their teacher's expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience within their English track placements.

Weeks one and two were the study's observational period. During this time, I took on the role of outside observer, noting the dynamics of each English track and paying special attention to the African American males within each class. Students in the classrooms I observed took part in regular class activities as I observed their behaviors and the ways in which they communicated with others. The observations allowed me to successfully identify the study's main participants in which I used for interview data collection and analysis. African American male students observed as the most willing to share their experiences were chosen for the next steps of the research. I believe their willingness to share individual experiences provided data that were rich and characterized by depth, the essentials for answering the research questions of the study.

Study participants were selected during weeks one and two of the study based on the observations. Week three was designated for the obtainment of consent from teachers and parents and assent from students. Consent forms were sent home by participants for parents to sign. Once forms were returned, the most critical part of the data collection began. The initial interviews were conducted in week four. Students who returned consent forms and had signed assent forms were interviewed. Interviews were conducted before and after school hours, whichever time period was best suited for individual participants. Interviews were semi-structured, using a combination of prepared questions and unprepared questions that arose during the course of the interview. Questions were structured to align with the themes of teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience. The interviews provided an opportunity to gather the necessary

information needed to explore how African American male students described their learning experiences within their English track placements. Participant interviews were audio-taped which was later transcribed for purposes of analysis. Student interview questions can be found in the appendix section. Teachers of each English track were also interviewed in week four. Although data from teachers were not a focus of the research, the information they provided was important in the discussion section of the research report, making connections and drawing conclusions from student data. Teacher interview questions can be found in appendix section. Weeks five and six were dedicated to continued observations, noting the dynamics of each English track and paying special attention to the participants within each class. Final interviews were conducted in week seven. Final interviews included several questions from the initial interviews, but also included additional questions that made reference to specific aspects of the English track participants were placed. This information was instrumental in adding depth to the previously collected data to understand participant learning experiences.

In sum, observations and interviews were conducted to better understand the learning experiences of participants within their English track placements. Observations were conducted to identify participants and explore the dynamics of each English track. Following observations, semi-structured interviews were administered to selected individuals participating in the study for formal data collection and analysis. Interview data were collected from eight African American male students, three students from the Standard and Honors tracks and two students from the Advance Placement English track. Interviews were conducted during weeks four and seven. Initial interviews were used to gain a general understanding of participants' thoughts and feelings about their English

track placements. Final interviews were more specific in nature, highlighting aspects of each English track specific to individual participants. Although not a focus of the study, teacher interviews were conducted in week four and samples of student assignments were collected for additional information. The data aided in drawing conclusions and making connections in the discussion section of the research report.

Phase III: Follow-up

At the conclusion of the study, I met with student interviewees for the purposes of asking follow up questions and member checking. Member checking occurs when the researcher takes data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if the results are plausible (Merriam, 1998). Considering the research purpose and questions, it was imperative the true thoughts and feelings of participants about their learning experiences were clearly documented. Only through valid observation and interview data, could meaningful analysis take place. Member checking took place week eight of the study. Students were met at their school site during a time best suited for their schedules, typically either before or after school hours. Table 7 shows the complete data collection schedule.

Table 7: Data collection schedule

Week	Date	Data Collection Activity
1	Week of Oct. 27	Classroom Observations
2	Week of Nov. 3	Classroom Observations
3	Week of Nov. 10	Consent/Assent (Parents, Students, Teachers)
4	Week of Nov. 17	Initial Interview
5	Week of Nov. 24	Analysis for Follow-Up Classroom Observations
6	Week of Dec. 1	Follow-Up Classroom Observations
7	Week of Dec. 8	Final Interview
8	Week of Dec. 15	Follow-Up / Member Checking

Data Analysis

"Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion" (Creswell, 2013, p. 180). In other words, data analysis involves the organization of data to make sense of what the researcher experienced (Glesne, 2011). The form of analysis chosen by a researcher is often linked to the study's research questions, theoretical orientation, and method of data collection (Glesne, 2011). Thematic analysis was the primary method of analyzing data in this study. The abovementioned method allowed for an in-depth analysis of the data, highlighting essential information to answer the research questions and develop a strong discussion of the research.

In thematic analysis, the researcher closely examines the data for themes and patterns (Glesne, 2011). Data coding is an essential part of this process. "With data coded, you read through all the pieces of data coded in the same way and first try to figure out what is at the core of that code" (Glesne, 2011, p. 187). Next, the researcher examines the data coded the same way for one case and determines in what ways it changes or varies in relationship to other factors (Glesne, 2011). Finally, the researcher explores how themes represented by the codes vary from case to case within the data (Glesne, 2011). Thematic analysis allowed me to group data based on the themes of teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experiences. Although the abovementioned themes were at the core of the research, other emerging themes were not ignored. Specifically, an analysis of the data illuminated themes focused on student identity, racial and academic isolation, and passive and active learning within the scope

of the research questions. Table 8 shows the thematic analysis procedure implemented in the study.

Table 8: Thematic analysis procedure

Thematic Analysis	
Phase	**Description**
1	**Become Familiar with the Data**
2	**Generate Initial Codes**
3	**Search for Themes**
4	**Review Themes**
5	**Define and Name Themes**
6	**Produce the Report**

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner (Merriam, 1998). Validation is to suggest that the researchers employ accepted strategies to document the accuracy of their studies (Creswell, 2013). “Being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields, such as education, in which practitioners intervene in people’s lives” (Merriam, 1998, p. 198). Through actionable steps to ensure trustworthiness, researchers can claim that their work is plausible or credible (Glesne, 2011). (Glesne, 2011) outlines eight procedures often used in qualitative research to contribute to the trustworthiness of a study. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review and debriefing, negative case analysis,

clarification of researcher bias, member checking, rich descriptions, and an external audit are ways in which a researcher can increase trustworthiness (Glesne, 2011). It may be unnecessary to include all of the abovementioned procedures within one study, but they should be considered to minimize validity issues (Glesne, 2011). The following section will outline validity issues within this study and ways in which I maintained the credibility of my research in light of these issues.

Clarifying my own bias was instrumental in the credibility of this study. I am very interested in the topic of tracking and understanding how African American males within differently tracked English courses describe their learning experiences. My personal theories of tracking and its potential harm to students, particularly students of color, may have led me to data that supported my own working hypothesis. I may have unconsciously heard or saw data in a way that aligned with my own beliefs. However, I addressed researcher bias by continuously exploring my own subjectivity. By writing before and after my interviews and observations, I was able to address pre-conceived opinions and reflect upon my biases.

During observations, it was difficult to determine whether students were performing in their best behavior rather than their usual behavior, because people act differently when they are being watched. This issue was addressed by spending long periods of time in each individual classroom. This allowed students to get used to my presence in the classroom as the researcher. By increasing the students' comfort with me as the classroom's outsider, they eventually behaved in their normal fashion. The observations of students' normal behavior allowed me to effectively choose participants that best represented the study.

This study was characterized by triangulation. I used multiple data collection methods, multiple sources, and multiple theoretical perspectives. Data were collected through observations and interviews, capturing what could and could not be seen. Observations allowed me to see the dynamics of each English track classroom. Interviews allowed me to uncover the thoughts and feelings of each participant. The combination of interview and observation data collection methods allowed for a study that was credible and rich in data, painting a clear picture for readers of the research. Instead of one, eight African American male students represented the voices of the research, allowing for different perspectives to be explored of the learning experiences in each track placement. The study was grounded in the frameworks of sociocultural theory, critical race theory, and interpretivist theory.

Peer reviews and debriefing were also a big component of my research for the purpose of trustworthiness. I counted on my dissertation chair and committee to comment on my findings as they emerged. This was instrumental in ensuring that my study was clear and did not contain any holes or gaps. More importantly, this procedure was necessary to ensure that the conclusions drawn from the data made sense, were aligned with my research questions, and were consistent amongst my committee members.

There were no risks associated with this study as participants were only recounting their classroom learning experiences. However, there were several benefits for the participants of the study. This study successfully allowed participants to pinpoint the factors hindering or fostering a positive learning experience for them through reflection. With this in mind, students could seek support to maximize the factors contributing to a healthy learning experience and minimize factors not conducive to enhancing the

classroom learning experience. Humankind benefits from this study because educators will gain an understanding of how to potentially help African American male students achieve in English within the context of various educational tracks. In this sense, teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic challenge can be improved. In addition, policy makers can decide whether further research needs to be conducted to determine if differential education tracks in general are providing students with the most need the best available education.

Significance/Importance

This research explored the classroom experiences of African American students in different tracked English courses. The information from this research will inform educators of the factors that contribute to or hinder a positive classroom learning experience for African American male students. Although findings are not generalizable, the research provides insight that could potentially inform classroom practices, thus, making way for culturally relevant pedagogy for African American male students.

This study also holds great significance because it can provide policy makers with insight in determining how students are grouped into education tracks. The study has the power to be a springboard for meaningful discussion around the issue of tracking and if the tracking system is really beneficial for all students. This research coupled with meaningful discussion can open the door for further research, qualitative or quantitative. Further research could then potentially have implications for education and transform the grouping landscape of students around the country.

Limitations

There are a few limitations associated with this study. Each English track was in a different grade level, meaning students were at different stages of their academic career and maturity. This dynamic could have influenced different responses due to grade level expectations as well as student interpretations of the course activities they participated in within their courses. Also, the research only took place at one high school and one English class from each track. Other high schools and classrooms may have had different cultures which may have influenced the learning experiences of each English track, offering different responses from participants. However, while this is a single site study, the site and classes were not unlike other English classes I have encountered.

Summary

This study used qualitative research methodology and a case study design to explore how African American male students within differently tracked English courses described their learning experience. The study involved eight African American male high school students and took place during the 2014 fall academic semester. I served as an outside observer as I collected data in each English track. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. The goal of the study was to explore how African American males in differently tracked English courses described their learning experiences, focusing on teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience. Data were collected for eight weeks and later analyzed using thematic analysis.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter will describe the researched Standard, Honors, and Advance Placement English tracks in-depth. Specifically, this chapter will use interview data to hone in on teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experiences described by the participants. Before a description of the aforementioned categories, there will be information given about the instructor's background as well as the course and classroom context to give the reader a better understanding of each specified English track. After data have been shared from teacher and students' perspectives, the section will conclude with a brief comparison between teacher and student descriptions of the learning experience within each track. Following within case track descriptions, an across case comparative analysis will be conducted to reveal how each English track compares in regards to teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience.

Standard Track English I

Teacher Background

Ms. Smith, a White woman in her early thirties, holds a degree in education from an accredited university in Midwestern United States. As an 11-year veteran, she has spent her entire teaching career in the current school system. She spent nine years at the middle school level and the majority of that time was teaching seventh grade English Language Arts. In those years, she had one class that was English as a Second Language inclusion. When Ms. Smith felt she was losing her passion for teaching, she made the

decision to teach at the high school level. She said, “I felt my energy and my love for getting up in the morning waning and I thought maybe it’s time for a change so I moved.” This school year will mark her second year at the high school and her first year teaching English I for freshmen. Ms. Smith believes enthusiasm and energy for students is her defining characteristic as a teacher. Her philosophy of teaching focuses on creating a positive classroom experience because she believes if you feel negatively when you walk in the classroom, you are predisposed to tuning out anything the teacher has to offer. “I feel like especially now, this season of education and especially for this group of kids, I think every group of kids needs positive experiences.” In light of her philosophy of teaching, Ms. Smith insists she does not worry as much about if students can tell her all of the verb tenses as she worries about in five years can they look back at the experiences in her classroom and say it was a positive one.

Ms. Smith believes race is a problem in our schools, not because there are multiple races, but because teachers have been trained to teach in a way that fills educational tracks, creating a predetermined path for students. She said, “Every skin color gets tracked, every Hispanic student, every White student, and every African American student.” She thinks there should be attention called to African American males, whom she believes are a neglected group of students who get tracked and sidelined, serving as a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. She said, “I think it is important to call attention to their experiences because in teaching, in this school, in this state, there are biases that are hidden that are affecting the student experiences of African American males.” Ms. Smith does not support how the current educational system groups and educates students of color and wants to fight against the unequal practices. However, she

believes her credibility suffers when discussing the topic because of a variety of factors. She said, “Talking to veteran teachers that hold a certain bias, I am a girl that’s coming here to ruffle a bunch of feathers. Talking to some of my African American students, I’m a White girl who doesn’t know what she is talking about.” Despite this, Ms. Smith works to ensure that all of her student can have a positive learning experience.

Course/Classroom Context

English I for freshmen, taught by Ms. Smith, was a high energy classroom. The class was often upbeat because of the teacher’s undying energy. On any given day you could find Ms. Smith telling a joke or bouncing around the room as the students laughed at her silly, energetic personality. She spoke to the students with enthusiasm and encouragement, usually sparking confidence and comfort in the students to participate in classroom activities. The classroom was a balanced mix of White, African American, and Hispanic students. It consisted of 15 boys and 10 girls. There were four African American males within the classroom population.

The classroom seating arrangement positioned the teacher at the front of the classroom and the students surrounding her desk. Students were seated in rows coming from the back and the sides of the room, allowing open space in the center of the classroom. This format positioned students for discussion and situated them to be faced towards each other so they could see faces and not the back of their classmates’ heads.

The walls of the classroom were covered with posters of quotes that shined light on foundational mindsets students should have to achieve success. Zooming in, there was a diversity poster. “Every child instinctively knows what many adults have long since forgotten; our differences are not something to be tolerated, they are something that

should be celebrated." Two other posters spoke to the class as the words engrained on them held value to their futures. "Life provides limitless opportunities and possibilities, visible only to those with a true desire to achieve." The final poster on this side of the classroom read, "Success. There is no greater reward for a job well done than the personal satisfaction of having done it."

On the board in the front of the classroom, students could find their homework assignment, bell schedule, and the table of contents for their class journals. Also included in the classroom were pictures of the teacher's family, two bookshelves full of novels and dictionaries, word walls, a cart of laptops, and thought-provoking themes from the current novel study on Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A few themes read, "Fear is the main cause of racism," "Prejudice and racism are a reality and will never go away," and "It is more important to be a part of the 'group' than to be an individual."

Teacher Expectations

In regard to her expectations as a teacher, Ms. Smith indicated that she expected students to be involved in classroom activities, be self-sufficient, and work to their full potential. Involvement was expressed to be a critical component and expectation of the course, something Ms. Smith continually stressed throughout the semester. "I really just want them to participate and I really want them to feel like they don't have to be afraid to be incorrect because it is through that, that we learn." Ms. Smith believed that she was a much better teacher when the students were actively involved in the learning process, expressing that she struggled to help students develop their skills when student involvement was low. However, she expressed that when students were participating she was better prepared to help them learn. "I do know how to help them understand how to

harness that energy." For the aforementioned reason, student involvement was imperative and an important expectation of students within the course.

Self-sufficiency was an expectation of equal importance as student participation. Ms. Smith said, "My expectation of them is learning how to manage their time, how to get study skills that they know work for them." As a result, she frequently taught several skills and allowed students to pick and use what helped them learn the best. She said, "My goal for them is to understand that I can only do so much and the rest is up to them." Ms. Smith explained that in order for students to be rooted in the theme of self-sufficiency, she had to empower them to learn by giving them some of the responsibility. For example, Ms. Smith described how she aided students in creating pictorial flash cards as a study strategy because of her belief that "much of what we gain from meaning is visual and they can make a visual representation that helps them remember meaning." However, she expressed that after instructing students how to use the study strategy, they were on their own in terms of implementing the taught skill. She said, "I can walk them through that, I can give them ideas for that, I can growl at them if they don't do it, but if they are not studying their flash cards, I don't know what to do for you." In addition to study skills, the theme of self-sufficient students was transparent when students were struggling with a task or answering a question. Ms. Smith said, "For the most part, my go-to answer to students is, 'Did you read the directions?'" Ms. Smith believed a lack of reading directions hindered students from being self-sufficient individuals so she constantly pushed them in that area. She said, "When they are struggling and they say I don't get it, I respond with you have it, it is right in front of you." Although Ms. Smith

may be received as what she coins a “smart Alec,” she insisted this was something she did in her classroom to better the development of her students.

The final theme of teacher expectations was students working to their full potential. Ms. Smith expressed that she received satisfaction when she felt like her students were performing at their individual best. She said, “I can look at Y’s flashcards and say okay you have the word, the definition, and a stick figure doing something. That’s your best. Good job.” On the other hand, another student could produce the same quality of work and she would be disappointed because she knew that the student could have produced better quality. Ms. Smith explained her expectation of students working to their full potential with the theoretical perspective that “what is fair is not equal and what is equal is not fair.” She emphasized her students performed at different levels, which meant that her inspection of quality was subjective. She said, “So encouraging them to do their best is what I want out of their work.” Ms. Smith further expressed she wanted her students to be honest in the quality of work they put forth and not give her what they thought she wanted to hear. She said, “That’s what I want from their work. I want it to be real.” In sum, students working to their full potential and doing their best was a prominent theme in Ms. Smith’s class, an expectation only extended to what she thought students were capable of producing based on their demonstrated abilities.

Teacher Description of Student/Peer Relationships

Ms. Smith described her class to be a social group of students who lacked academic focus. She expressed her class consisted of a “chatty” group of individuals who were often distracted from course assignments with their urge to converse with each another. She said, “Because they are very social, they communicate well with each other,

but they get off task easily." Ms. Smith explained students wanted to complete a task, but lacked the self control to finish. She said, "For example, one will say come on guys we really need to get this done, but that same person will get pulled off task." In fact, the lack of focus students had in the course contributed to some of the present conflicts within the class. Ms. Smith explained on any given day you might hear students frustrated with their peers saying, "You're not doing anything because you're just talking and laughing," which happened often. The social nature of the students and their lack of academic focus even frustrated the teacher at times. In these moments, Ms. Smith expressed she usually told students that their education was not all about her. She conveyed to students, "Whether you fail or not I still go home. I put in my hard work. It's going to affect you." Ms. Smith expressed the students were still working on becoming mature, which explained why they, at times, were social and lacked focus during critical moments of course instruction.

Teacher Description of Academic Experience

Ms. Smith explained the academic experience consisted of choice writing exercises, vocabulary, and novel units. The choice writing exercise, known as writing into the day, was the first activity students completed when they came to class. Ms. Smith said, "There is a nonfiction type of choice, a fiction type of choice, and a free write." The writing exercise usually ended with students sharing their written responses to the writing prompts. Vocabulary consisted of students getting a list of words, learning the words, and working through changing the function of the words. Ms. Smith explained there were a few activities accompanied by the vocabulary lesson. She said, "We do flash cards, they have a matching synonym worksheet, and they have a fill in the blank worksheet."

During novel units, students read the text in a variety of formats. Ms. Smith expressed students read the selected books as a class and with partners. She also indicated, in some cases, students would read along with the novel audiotape as a class. As a way to support students' comprehension, Ms. Smith conveyed that during novel units, "there are basic comprehension questions and sometimes it is draw what you think is going on in the book."

In order for me to better understand the level of thinking required of students in their academic experience, I asked Ms. Smith about the most challenging assignment, types of questions she asked, and if she gave students assignments in which they had to look to other sources to get answers. In what she described as the most challenging task, students were required to create a Book Make. In this assignment, students chose a book, chose a creative way to present the book from a list, and submitted a reflective write-up including the book title, author, and summary. Students were not required to analyze or synthesize content within their books. Ms. Smith explained that "it's not difficult in the product. It's difficult in them figuring out what they want to make for the product." To further my understanding of the level of thinking Ms. Smith required of students, I asked how often she requested answers to questions that only had one right answer in her assignments, she responded with 75% of the time before changing her answer to 50%. She voiced, "I never really thought about that before. Maybe, I don't know." Ms. Smith also expressed it was a rarity that she gave students assignments in which they had to look to other sources to get answers. She explained, "They won't do it or they have limited resources." She mentioned that if she wanted students to see something then she would provide it for them.

In sum, I gathered several key takeaways from Ms. Smith's perspective on the classroom experience of her Standard English I course. She expected her students to be involved in classroom activities, be self-sufficient, and work to their full potential. In regard to student relationships, Ms. Smith described her class as a social group of students who lacked academic focus because of their eagerness to engage each other in conversation. The academic experience consisted of choice writing exercises, vocabulary, and novel units. Writing exercises occurred at the onset of class and provided students with choice prompts to write a response. Vocabulary required students to learn words through the creation of flashcards and complete matching and fill in the blank worksheets to assess their learning. Novel units consisted of students reading books in a variety of formats (whole class, partners, or audio) and answering basic comprehension questions to assess their knowledge of the novel.

Standard English I Student Voice

In the Standard track English course, Scott, Sam, and Sean were the student participants who consented to be interviewed about their learning experiences. Scott played for the school's football team, math was his favorite subject, and he overall enjoyed the high school environment. He was able to make a lot of friends and register for classes that he liked. Sam was not involved in any extracurricular activities at school, but enjoyed how the high school setting differed from middle school. He said that the support he gained from his teachers was what separated the two settings and he was happy about what he was learning. He expressed that he loved to read, particularly fantasy and sci-fi books. Sean communicated he was an A/B student and was happy about his high school experience thus far. He said that he was keeping is grades up, not

involved in any drama, and was able to build relationships with his peers. He expressed that English was his favorite subject because he had a goofy teacher and the assignments were usually easy and fun to do. Each student willingly accepted the offer to participate in the research study and was very cooperative throughout the process. Evidenced in the data, each participant gave responses painting a clear picture of how they experienced their Standard track English course, elaborating on teacher expectations, discussing peer relationships, and vividly describing their academic experiences.

Teacher Expectations

The Standard Track English I participants indicated their teacher expected them to be attentive students and complete all assignments. Interview data from the participants illuminated the teacher was most concerned with students paying attention in class and assignment completion. In fact, the abovementioned characteristics were deemed indicators of students being "good students," as the participants disclosed. When asked what a good student does, Sam replied, "Pay attention and do the work." Sean uttered a similar response communicating, "My teacher expects me to be a really good student that keeps up with my class work." In a separate interview, Scott mentioned a good student is one who meets the teacher's expectations, does their work, and pays attention in class. Assignment completion trumped any expectation of students performing at high intellectual levels. Sean mentioned Ms. Smith really did not ask much of him as long as he was doing what she requested. Assignment completion was also an expectation of assignment quality. If students completed an assignment, it symbolized a job well done on their part. Sam said, "She doesn't expect us to be perfect." When discussing assignment quality with Scott he expressed, "Like everything completed. Like no

questions or blank spaces. That's about it." Sean mentioned for major assignments, which students rarely received, Ms. Smith wanted students to produce a quality of work that had details and reasons to back up details, "but if it is a quick fill in the blank assignment, she just expects me to put the answer and that is it."

Students expressed Ms. Smith was so consumed with assignment completion that if they were struggling with a task, as Sam mentioned, Ms. Smith would come to their aid as soon as they asked her for help. Scott mentioned that Ms. Smith usually comes quickly to help when he is struggling and Sean said, "Usually she just says bring it up here and she shows us what we need to do and that's it." The data from the three participants were a clear indicator that attentiveness and assignment completion were the main expectations of their Standard English I course.

Student-Peer Relationships

The participants described their relationships with their peers to be collegial. The participants conveyed they worked well with their classmates when they had to and problems in class were minimal. Other than group work, students were to themselves, rarely depending on others when working on tasks. Scott asserted students worked well together mainly because the students had known each other since elementary school. However, the participants said beyond the requirements of the course, they were only close with few students. Sam said he barely talked to the students in the class. When asked why he replied, "Most people in there I only have that one class with them. Maybe if they had multiple classes with me then we probably would talk." Scott's response was similar when asked about his relationship with his classmates, making it clear that he did not talk to anyone in his English I class outside of the course requirements. "I just don't

see them outside of class that's why I just don't try to focus on being like…like talking to them." Sean also expressed that he had few friends in the course that he communicated with beyond scheduled class time. As a result, students did what was required of them in class to function as a unit, but when class was over the communication with their peers ended as well. Based on the data, the limited amount of collaborative work seemed to limit the building and maintaining of relationships between students. Consequently, the atmosphere in the classroom reflected collegial relationships.

Academic Experience

Sean, Sam, and Scott voiced the course assignments usually focused on writing warm-ups, vocabulary, and reading novels. Sam summed up a usual day in class by communicating, "When we go in we usually have three writing prompts we have to choose from and write. Then we go into the lesson and after the lesson we finish up previous work we didn't get to finish." Write two sentences about your weekend, write two sentences about your old seating arrangement, and write a short poem about poop were examples of the writing prompts students could have chosen to write a response. Vocabulary was the most talked about by the participants in terms of usual course assignments. When I asked Sean to describe the usual assignments in his class the first thing and only thing he said was vocabulary. Scott mentioned, "We make flashcards. She does when you fill in the blank, matching, and that's about it." After students finished vocabulary, they usually moved into the book they were reading for the unit. During my research, students in the Standard English class read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As Sam described, the assignments with the novel usually required students to summarize sections students read as a class. Sam said, "After every chapter we finish, we have to

write a summary about the chapter and then we have a discussion about what was going on in that particular chapter." The participants voiced the most challenging assignment was their book project. The book project consisted of students reading a book of their choice and creating a product to present the book to the class. Scott said the project had to include "what the book was about, main characters, the author, and their background." In sum, the academic experience consisted of informal journal writing, vocabulary, and novel reading that required students to write summaries about the sections they read.

The participants conveyed classroom experiences that specifically highlighted the teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience of their English I course. They expressed that their teacher expected them to be attentive and complete all assignments. The participants voiced that being attentive and completing assignments was characteristic of a good student. In regards to student-peer relationships, the participants described their relationships with their peers to be collegial. They expressed that they worked well with their classmates when they had to, but other than that, there was not a deeper connection between them. This was said by the participants to be a result of not having similar course schedules to build authentic relationships. There collegial relationships can also be attributed to the style of instruction incorporated in their classroom. The participants had fewer chances to collaborate as most of their assignments were independent tasks such as writing, doing worksheets, and reading. The participants expressed the academic experience focused on choice writing exercises, vocabulary, and novel reading. Sam, Sean, and Scott explained they did a writing warm-up when they entered the classroom to begin the class period. They said vocabulary was accompanied by making flashcards and completing matching and fill in the blank

worksheets. Lastly, novel reading was a big component of the academic experience. The participants said they were required to write chapter summaries as they read their novels. Participants did not describe novel reading that was critical nor did they describe any analytical activities that accompanied text content.

Standard English I Teacher-Student Data Comparison

An examination of the classroom experiences described by Ms. Smith and her students revealed differences in perspective. In regard to teacher expectations, Ms. Smith expected students to participate in classroom activities, be self sufficient, and work to their full potential. She expressed that her expectations were representative of active learning, a type of instruction that focuses the responsibility of learning on learners. It seemed that she wanted students to do more than just listen in her class, but become immersed and engaged in the learning process. However, the participants described different expectations. They believed their teacher expected them to be attentive students who completed all assignments. Contrary to Ms. Smith's expectations, the expectations conveyed by the students were representative of passive learning. I interpreted the expectation to be attentive to assume students were to act as sponges to be filled with knowledge instead of creating their own perspectives on subject matter. The expectation of assignment completion was also representative of passive learning asking students to follow the teacher's instructions, instead of think actively and critically while doing a requested assignment.

I think the differences in expectations conveyed by teacher and students was a reflection of Ms. Smith not being clear about what she expected from students to them and not operating her classroom in her vision of student learning. Consequently, her

instruction failed to engage students as she hoped. For example, Ms. Smith wanted students to be involved in the learning process, but she did not engage students in activities that fostered collaboration and critical analysis; nor did she clearly express to the students what student involvement or active participation in classroom activities looked like. The classroom lacked a clear model of expectations and instruction that aligned to the established expectations.

Ms. Smith described her class to be a social group of students who lacked academic focus. She explained during coursework students would often get distracted because of their constant talking and laughing. I interpreted her playful and open descriptions of student interaction to be characteristic of students who were fairly close or familiar with one another at a superficial level but not deeply involved in learning together. However, Sam, Scott, and Sean described relationships with their peers to be different. They conveyed that the relationship with their peers was collegial. They said they worked well with their peers when they had to during group work, but other than that, they rarely talked to them inside of class. The participants expressed they rarely communicated with their classmates because they did not have enough classes with them to form authentic relationships. I interpreted their responses to be characteristic of students that were unfamiliar with one another. This finding differed from what Ms. Smith described as students eager to converse and play with each other. I think the social and off task behavior Ms. Smith observed was not characteristic of friends wanting to converse and play, but a consequence of giving students assignments not rigorous enough to keep them thinking and on task.

There was alignment in academic experience descriptions by the teacher and students. They both explained the usual assignments focused on informal writing exercises, vocabulary, and novel reading. I interpreted their descriptions of the academic experience to be characteristic of passive learning, a reflection of the expectations the students explained earlier in this section. Writing consisted of students following the teacher's prompts and doing only what was expected to complete the assignment instead of writing to expand their own knowledge and experience with a topic. Vocabulary consisted of repetitive exercises to internalize words instead of learning to change the function of the words or situating them in different contexts to manipulate their meaning. Lastly, novel reading required students to just read the text instead of thinking critically about the novel to create meaning, make inferences, draw conclusions, and discover the purpose of the text. Based on the descriptions of the academic experience, I do not believe that students were involved enough in the learning process to make transformational academic and intellectual gains. Operating in a passive style of learning, I believe, hindered students from working to their full potential, an expectation that Ms. Smith expressed she had for her students. See Table 9 for a comparison of teacher and student data.

Table 9: Standard English I teacher-student data comparison

Standard Track English I		
Teacher		**Student**
Involved Self-Sufficient Work to Full Potential	**Teacher Expectations**	Attentive Assignment Completion
Social Lack Academic Focus	**Student-Peer Relationships**	Collegial
Choice Writing Exercises Vocabulary Novel Units	**Academic Experience**	Writing Warm-Ups Vocabulary Novel Reading

Honors English II

Teacher Background

Mr. Harris has been in the teaching profession for over 25 years. At the onset of his education, he attended a seminary school in Texas to become a pastor. In his time venturing into that field, he decided that he wanted to become a teacher. The early years of his teaching career began at a private school in Georgia where he taught for several years. After a short stint in Mississippi to take on the roll of a youth pastor, Mr. Harris moved to a metropolitan area to teach at a private Christian school for a few years before moving to another Christian school in a smaller town to teach. At the end of his term at the Christian school, Mr. Harris became the principal of another Christian school in a rural part of the state for eight years. In his time there he taught, at some point, first through eighth grade. His eagerness to teach at the high school level is what brought him to Southwest High, where he began as an English teacher in the freshman academy. He has been at the current high school for eight years, his first time in the public school arena. His experience and expertise were contributing factors in his placement as a 10th grade Honors English teacher.

Course/Classroom Context

Honors English II taught by Mr. Harris, a White male in his late fifties, was a classroom setting filled with many things that supplied its occupants with comfort, inspiration, and motivation. The atmosphere had a feel of positive vibes and achievement. Portraits, posters, and items of school pride consumed the walls of the classroom, leaving little white space to be shown. There were pictures of geography, diverse ethnic groups,

maps, sports teams, and historical events. Quotes of inspiration were spread around the classroom. You could look around and see, “believe in the wonders of tomorrow,” “all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well,” and “the most important things aren’t things” among other positive quotes. The importance of education and reaching higher education were promoted through college banners of Wake Forest, North Carolina State, University of North Carolina, Appalachian State, Texas, Auburn, Ohio, Tennessee, and Clemson posted around the room. A “homey” atmosphere was also embedded in the classroom environment as there were lamps, benches, and a Christmas tree propped in the learning space. The Christmas tree was a reminder of achievement, as all of the ornaments were of colleges and universities. There were a total of 25 students, 13 girls and 12 boys. Out of the 25 students, three were African American and all three were males. The students were seated in rows facing the board. The teacher’s desk was at the front of the classroom with a podium to the right of it where the teacher usually stood to communicate to his students. The course was generally teacher centered, as students rarely worked in groups to explore concepts, but sat and wrote as the teacher transmitted course concepts into their notebooks.

Teacher Expectations

In regard to teacher expectations, the interview data show Mr. Harris expected his students to be college ready, think critically, and be prepared for the Honors English II End of Course exam. These expectations were the driving force behind class activities and instruction. Mr. Harris explained the emphasis on testing was the reason he was placed in Honors English II. He said, “That’s why I moved up from ninth grade to tenth, when they started testing in the tenth grade.” Along with his move, came higher

expectations for his students. He said, “I want them to do well on their EOC and then I want them to be college ready of course.” Mr. Harris stressed he knew what was expected of students at the college level because he taught part-time at a local college. To Mr. Harris, college ready meant writing responses in full paragraph form, with evidence of critical thinking. He said, “It’s not just finding the metaphor in the sentence, it’s explaining the metaphor and why it was effective.” In efforts of getting students to become college ready, Mr. Harris said he would have achieved his expectation of preparing students for the Honors English II End of Course exam. Mr. Harris exclaimed it was about getting students to the next level when explaining their answers. He said, “I want them to be able to explain why the author would have used a literary device or explain the effectiveness of it. Why he or she would choose to do that.” To increase critical thinking skills, Mr. Harris would often allow students to struggle before helping them with a task. He insisted through this, students were forced to think. He said, “With the Honors kids, I want them to sweat a little. They need to struggle a little bit.” For the aforementioned reasons, the expectation was for students to become college ready, critical thinkers, and prepared for the Honors English II exam.

Teacher Description of Student/Peer Relationships

Mr. Harris described his students as family oriented and dependent on each other. The data reveal the students had a lot of respect for one another and were characteristic of a family. Mr. Harris said, in reference to his students, “They are not sarcastic and they are more affirmational.” Mr. Harris expressed the students were close friends, participating in band, ROTC, baseball, and other extracurricular activities. He said, “They eat lunch together and some of them live in the same neighborhoods.” Mr. Harris believed a sense

of community pride bonded the students together. He communicated the closeness of the students resulted in positive interaction in class as well as a positive atmosphere. He said, "These kids have been…like when they come in the room I am happy to see them."

Mr. Harris explained the closeness of the students also brought about a dependency on one another. He said, "They probably want to depend on each other more than they should." Mr. Harris conveyed the students were supporters of each other when it came to quizzes and assignments, alluding to the fact that they were capable of cheating. However, the students did not see their collaboration as cheating. Mr. Harris voiced, "That's the thing about these kids; they've been in school together since kindergarten and they share answers like they share lunch. They don't look at it as cheating." Despite this, the students always looked to help one another, whether on quizzes, readings, or projects. Mr. Harris said the students wanted to protect each other from looking stupid or performing poorly on a given task. He further expressed that his students often provided support and care for each other as well as looked toward each other in a time of need. For the aforementioned reason, the category of student-peer relationships was deeply rooted in the theme of family oriented students, dependent on one another.

Teacher Description of Academic Experience

Mr. Harris described the academic experience to be reading and writing intensive with students using a critical lens on most assignments. Assignments usually included reading and reflective writing students did in their journals. Mr. Harris marked reading as the biggest requirement of the course. Students read a novel a month, which was described as pretty aggressive by Mr. Harris. He said, "They have to read a lot. Most of

them do the reading. Some of them don't and just want to read the summaries." Mr. Harris expressed completing course readings was the only way students could be successful in other aspects of the course which required a critical lens. He explained a choice not to read was strongly unadvised because students would miss out on the critical thinking parts that would show up on quizzes and reflections. Mr. Harris said critical thinking questions would revolve around character motivation or would be inferential in nature. He explained his questioning allowed him to see what students knew and examine their thought process. Seeing what each student got from the readings was important to him. He said, "Twelve people might have 12 different answers and that's okay as long as it supports what happened." Most of the written answers Mr. Harris requested had more than one right answer. He said, "I don't do fill in the blanks and I don't do multiple choice. I usually do open-ended questions." Students did a lot of writing in the course, usually having to reflect on the readings or answer a multi-layered question on a quiz or test. The academic experience was reading and writing intensive with a critical lens on course topics.

In sum, Mr. Harris expected his students to be college ready, think critically, and be prepared for the Honors English II End of Course exam. College-readiness and being prepared for the end of course exam meant reading with a critical lens, writing responses in full paragraph form, and demonstrating evidence of critical thinking. In regards to student-peer relationships, Mr. Harris described his students as family oriented and dependent on each other. He explained that his students had profound support for their classmates and were involved in a variety of extracurricular activities together, which created a strong family bond. He further discussed how dependent his students were on

each other in regards to academic tasks, voicing they would often aid one another on quizzes and assignments. Mr. Harris described the academic experience to be reading and writing intensive with students using a critical lens on most assignments.

Honors English II Student Voice

In Honors English II, Henry, Harrison, and Howard were the consented participants interviewed about their learning experiences. In fact, these students were the only African American students within their Honors English II course. Howard communicated he liked basketball and engineering. He insisted he came to school solely for the education and that is what he enjoyed most about the experience. Harrison played for the school's basketball team and described himself as laid back, calm, and cool. He said high school was not as hard as people made it seem. However, he explained students could not afford to be lazy because every class counted and affected their grade point average. Henry played for the school's basketball and football teams. All of his classes were at the Honors level except for one Advance Placement engineering course. He explained in his high school experience he was learning to focus on himself and his grades and not so much on making friends and being popular. He stressed he was trying to maintain a good academic standing so that he could get into Beta Club, a community service club that he expressed would look good on his resume and help him get into college. Each student willingly accepted the offer to participate in the research study and was very cooperative throughout the process. Evidenced in the data, each student gave responses that painted a clear picture of how they experienced their Standard track English course, elaborating on teacher expectations, discussing peer relationships, and vividly describing their academic experiences.

Teacher Expectations

The participants explained their teacher expected them to be an advanced group of students, intellectually independent, and to ground their work in evidence. An advanced group of students was a reoccurring theme as the participants often expressed the expectation of demonstrating abilities deemed higher than a Standard track English class. Henry expressed, "he expects you to be more advanced than a regular class. Since it is Honors, he expects you to have better answers or to talk better." When Howard was asked about teacher expectations he said, "I think he definitely expects something good since we are in an Honors class." Harrison voiced the teacher expectations is what separated the Honors from the Standard class. He said, "If we don't have those higher expectations we're just a regular class and not Honors. We're not doing anything different." Behavior was also an area the teacher expected students to demonstrate they were more advanced than Standard track students in regards to maturity. Harrison expressed, "he expects us to be more mature than regular classes. If we're goofing off he'll be like, come on guys you all are Honors students." It was clear that Mr. Harris wanted his students to set themselves apart from Standard track English II students. In fact, Harrison stated, "At the end of the day, he thinks that Honors kids are smarter. That's why he expects more."

Intellectual independence was a significant theme in the data of teacher expectations. Participants expressed that Mr. Harris wanted them to have control over their own learning. Howard indicated that "he (Mr. Harris) can only do so much to teach us, but we have to try to engage in the curriculum and sort of participate." Howard asserted this was one of the most important things in the class. He added, "What he really

wants to see is how a person works as an individual so that if there is something wrong we can work on it so we can be a better writer and reader." The expectation was of independence, a trait that was expressed to be the standard for an Honors level class. Mr. Harris was said to constantly push students to achieve this desired intellectual independence. Harrison conveyed that "he makes you work. He doesn't just give you the answer. He'll tell you to think about what we talked about or look in your notes." Struggle in completing a task or answering a question was part of creating stronger intellectually independent students. Henry added that "he tries to get you to figure it out instead of just telling you the answer." Participants knew their academic development was contingent on their ability to be intellectually independent.

The ability to ground responses, whether oral or written, in evidence was a major expectation of students. Harrison, Howard, and Henry communicated that it was imperative to thoroughly support any response given during class. Henry said, "He expects you to have complete sentences and not to have a one word answer. He expects you to explain the answer, why this or why that." Although Mr. Harris wanted students to highlight their thoughts in responses, they needed to provide support for any statement or claim that was made. Harrison stated, "He tells us to use examples to support why you would think that. At the same time he wants your opinion, he wants you to back it up." Howard emphasized that depth was important to any student response. He added that Mr. Harris wanted to ensure student responses were credible and conveyed in a way other students could understand. "You have to have not just one reason, but more than one reason in order to back up your answer." Responses grounded in evidence ultimately

allowed students to internalize material, become more immersed in the content, and further develop their argumentative skills.

Student-Peer Relationships

In regard to relationships with their peers, the participants expressed that they were academically dependent on their peers, but from a social perspective, distant. The participants expressed they were only interested in interacting with others when they needed help on an assignment. Harrison stated students depend on each other a lot for academic help. “We do that a lot. We’ll talk amongst each other. Like, if I didn’t read something that night or something, I’ll ask what happened, who’s this, or that.” Henry recounted a time when students depended on each other to complete a test. “We had a test that we had to work together to get the right answers. We did pretty good working as a team.” Howard’s experience with academic dependence was a little different than Henry and Harrison’s experience. He explained students depended on him more than he depended on them. “My classmates ask me more questions than I ask them. I guess they seem to think I just understand the class better.” Other than their dependence for academic help, students exhibited minimal interaction that was rather distant.

Harrison expressed when Mr. Harris would tell students to get into groups students would not make an effort to collaborate with different students within the classroom. “Everyone always pick the same person to work with pretty much. So like, we don’t really work with each other.” Harrison indicated he usually worked with Henry when it was time for group work. Howard stated, “I actually prefer to work alone.” He further added that he did not feel connected to his peers. “I’m kind of new to the district and I don’t really know them as well as they know other people.” Henry expressed he

knew his classmates well because they have been in the same classes; but he only felt connected to the students he played sports with at school. Harrison stated he only had a close bond with the other African American participant, Henry. When asked why he explained, “It’s not many I talk to. It’s just a few I like ‘get’.” According to participant responses, the classroom environment was not that inviting for student relationships, particularly because of the issue of race.

Henry and Harrison believed that the distance between them and their peers was race related. Henry indicated, “Since you are a Black person sometimes they’ll think you’re not supposed to be in there.” As a result, Henry and Harrison felt like they had to often prove themselves in the course to get recognition. Harrison voiced, “It’s sort of like you’re not just representing yourself. If you’re outnumbered like that you have to let your grades show why you are in that class.” Henry expressed that some of his White peers would not even look at him. Harrison recounted a time when he was stereotyped in class by one of his White peers. “She told me when she first met me she stereotyped me. Like, I was going to be another one. Like just typical lazy, didn’t want to do anything, rude.” Harrison asserted he felt like other students in his class had the same thoughts about him. Henry felt like he was often stereotyped as well. He described how getting into groups was difficult at times. Henry believed his White classmates thought he could not make a contribution to assignments because he was Black. “They don’t look at you first to see if you can help them. Like, you have to put yourself in a group.” Henry insisted it did not bother him as much because he was determined to do his best no matter what others thought of him. “You can’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do it. You have to keep grinding and do what you have to do.”

The participants expressed students were only concerned with getting ahead academically than building and maintaining relationships with each other. As a result, the classroom lacked student motivation and support. Harrison stated, “We really just worry about ourselves. It seems like that to me.” Henry said, “It’s not really motivation. I give motivation to myself.” The abovementioned sentiments are that of a socially distant classroom atmosphere in which students care about getting ahead academically alone instead of coming together to achieve a common goal. The data represent a theme of academically dependent and socially distant students in regard to student-peer relationships.

Academic Experience

Harrison, Henry, and Howard described the academic experience to focus on critical reading and writing. Participant responses illuminated an academic experience that involved critically reading a text and making judgments about the text content in written form. Texts were never said to be taken at face value, but were discussed to involve an examination of claims put forth as well as the way in which content was presented by an author. Students were exposed to a lot of literature in which they had to write critical responses. Henry expressed in responses “you have to explain your opinion and you have to have details and context from the book.” Howard stated, “We may have to read something and then he’ll ask us to write a paragraph about a certain quote out of the book.” Harrison communicated that written responses were serious and required a great level of focus and thinking. “You have to put so much thought into it. You can’t just write something down.” The magnitude of concentration needed to be successful on reader responses was further elaborated on as Harrison said, “You have to fully read

everything. You can't go too fast. You have to take your time." Responses came in a variety of forms as the participants expressed Mr. Harris produced questions could have a multitude of answers. Howard conveyed Mr. Harris was more concerned about students supporting their answers than having one right answer. In some cases, Howard stated students would have to read essays and Mr. Harris would give multiple choice questions about the text. Although students did not have to produce written responses in these cases, questions were critical in nature to foster higher order thinking skills. Participants expressed their critical lens for texts did not end when class was over, but continued into their homework assignments. Henry asserted, "He gives us homework about the books we read, like we have to write a paragraph about the book." The responses students gave were indicators that the academic experience was centered on critical reading and writing, as evidenced by the examples in the data.

In sum, the Honors English II participants described a classroom experience that was grounded in teacher expectations that prompted them to think of themselves as an advanced group of students, intellectually independent, and to ground their work in evidence. The participants expressed that their teacher wanted them to set themselves apart from Standard track students in everything they did. They explained that independence was an expectation of Mr. Harris to get students to take control over their own learning and grounding their work in evidence was important in any credible response. Henry, Harrison, and Howard described their relationships with their peers to be academically dependent, but socially distant. They voiced students depended on each other to better understand concepts or to complete assignments, but felt a socially distant relationship because they were the only African Americans in the class. The participants

described the academic experience to focus on critical reading and writing. They explained that they often critically read a text and made judgments about the content in written form.

Honors English II Teacher-Student Data Comparison

Mr. Harris and his students shared similar expectations of the course. Mr. Harris expressed he expected his students to be college ready, critical thinkers, and prepared for the Honors English II End of Course exam. College ready, to Mr. Harris, meant getting students to the next level in their writing and critical thinking. He believed if he could get students to independently think about a text from a critical perspective and effectively write responses rooted in textual content, he would have achieved his mission to prepare them for college and their end of course exam. In alignment with the aforementioned expectations, the students expressed that Mr. Harris expected them to be an advanced group, intellectually independent, and to ground their work in evidence. I believe the alignment of expectations between the teacher and students was a reflection of Mr. Harris investing his students in his mission of college readiness and end of course exam preparation. This suggests that Mr. Harris, at some point, communicated to his students the classroom goals as well as what it would take for students to achieve the established goals.

Mr. Harris described his students to be family oriented and academically dependent on each other. He described his students as family oriented because they were close, participated in extracurricular activities together, lived in the same neighborhoods, and showed each other a lot of respect and support. In addition to being family oriented, Mr. Harris voiced that his students were academically dependent on each other, often

helping each other on quizzes, readings, and other assignments. The relationships that Mr. Harris believed his students had, did not fully apply to how Harrison, Howard, and Henry experienced their peers. Like Mr. Harris, these participants described their relationships with their peers to be academically dependent. They helped each other to ensure content knowledge was internalized, assignments were completed, and readings were understood. I believe students depended on each other academically because they were all driven by the classroom goals and expectations. Students seemed eager to meet the expectations of Mr. Harris and this is one thing that brought them together. However, from a social standpoint, the participants did not see their relationship with peers to be family oriented. In fact, they expressed that their relationship with their peers was distant, in part, because of race. The participants, Harrison, Howard, and Henry, were the only African Americans in the class and they explained they often felt stereotyped and not accepted by their peers. The feelings of belonging to a family may have applied to other students in the class, but was not shared by the African American male participants of this study.

Mr. Harris and the participants described the academic experience to be critical reading and writing intensive. They both described the academic experience to encompass critically reading a text and making judgments about the text content in written form. It was clear to me that course activities were aligned with the expectations of the course. It seemed that Mr. Harris was steadfast in ensuring that his students learned in a way that ultimately prepared them for the end of course exam and becoming college ready. See Table 10 for a comparison of teacher and student data.

Table 10: Honors English II teacher-student data comparison

Honors Track English II		
Teacher		**Student**
College-Ready Critical Thinkers Prepared for EOC	**Teacher Expectations**	Advanced Independent Ground Work in Evidence
Family Oriented Dependent	**Student-Peer Relationships**	Academically Dependent Socially Distant
Critical Reading & Critical Writing (Intensive)	**Academic Experience**	Critical Reading & Writing

Advance Placement Language

Teacher Background

Ms. Allison received her bachelor's degree from a state university in North Carolina and achieved a master's degree in Secondary English Education from another state university in North Carolina. Along with her degrees, Ms. Allison holds National Board certification. The current school year marks her 11th year teaching. For the first six years of her career, Ms. Allison taught Advance Placement and International Baccalaureate students at the high school level. Following her experience at the traditional high school level, she changed school systems and taught at an alternative school for two years. Her most recent school transition landed her at Southwest High where she has spent the last three years of her teaching career. This school year marks her first time teaching Advance Placement English in the past four years. Her previous course assignments were at the regular track level. This school year Ms. Allison teaches Advance Placement Language for junior level students. The following sections will uncover, based on teacher interview data, Ms. Allison's expectations for students, her description of the student-peer relationships within her classroom, and her description of the Advance Placement Language academic experience.

Course/Classroom Context

Advance Placement Language is a course for juniors taught by Ms. Allison, a White woman in her early thirties. The course consisted of 24 students, 15 females and nine males. Of the classroom population, there were three African American students, one of which was male. The rest of the class population was predominantly White. The desks were positioned in traditional rows facing the room whiteboard, which displayed the lesson objectives and agenda for the day. The teacher's desk was positioned to the left of the whiteboard in the corner of the room. The teacher's desk was usually vacant as she frequently moved around the classroom to present instructional material or check on students during class activities. The majority of the wall space was dedicated to student work, showcasing the students' creativity and diverse intellectual abilities. The rest of the wall space was reserved for posters alluding to how students should behave within the learning environment as they collaborate with their peers. For example, "Look for the best in others, treat others the way you want to be treated, choose positive influences, speak words of kindness, and forgive yourself and others." The American flag and flags from the universities the teacher attended were hung in different areas of the room. The classroom also included a tall bookshelf of novels, textbooks, and magazines, a cart of laptops, and a bin of past assignments, designated for students who may have been absent at some point during the week. The course was student centered, as the teacher usually positioned herself to facilitate learning, putting the exploration of concepts in the hands of the students.

Teacher Expectations

In regard to teacher expectations, the major themes in the data were making students independent, college ready students. Independence was illuminated through the teacher's communication of wanting the students to find their own way, thus making them struggle before leading them in the right direction on a given task or question. She said, "I try to lead them in the right direction, but I don't want to provide the answer." Ms. Allison believed creating a strong level of independence amongst the students would ultimately prepare them for college. Further, college readiness was highlighted in the data as the teacher expressed her mission to create open minded critical thinkers, better readers and writers, and students that would be able to research their thoughts. Not allowing multiple choice questions, but questions that would force well developed answers backed by research was a big expectation of students of Ms. Allison. She expected students to perform intellectually at the highest level of Blooms Taxonomy. She said, "Moving past the lower level of Bloom's to the highest part of Bloom's and just hanging out there instead of the bottom levels." She believed having the abovementioned expectations of the students would allow them to be prepared for the AP exam which would give them college credit. She said, "I expect college level work. I told them going into it that's what I expect. I gave them examples, guidelines, and they have opportunities to revise if it doesn't meet those standards." In sum, the responses from the teacher on expectations for students were driven by a standard of college readiness and independence.

Teacher Description of Student/Peer Relationships

Ms. Allison described her students to be a bounded, exclusive group of learners. The interview revealed a bounded relationship between students as Ms. Allison discussed how connected the students were in and outside of class. She said, “The AP students in here are very much a clique because they go from class to class with each other and they are use to each other.” She explained how the students were great motivators of each other academically and connected outside of class through social media, sports, and casual hanging out. Ms. Allison expressed that students in this track were so close that working well together was a usual dynamic of the class and conflict was a rarity.

The students in this track were deemed to be an exclusive group by several factors. First, the dynamic of the group comprised of mostly White students that were of middle to upper socioeconomic status. Secondly, in order to fit in with the students, as Ms. Allison described, you must fit their criteria, meaning intellectual abilities as well as socioeconomic status. She said, “When new ones (students) are infiltrated, they don’t accept them as readily as they could.” Ms. Allison recounted one student that was new to the class that seemed socioeconomically disadvantaged by the clothes she wore as well as the place she lived. She said that this student did not seem to be intellectually on par with the other students. As a result, Ms. Allison said this student was often outcast from the other students and no one wanted to work with her. She said, “She just chooses to sit by herself and she keeps to herself.” The bounded, exclusive nature of the class made it extremely challenging for others to fit in or “infiltrate,” a term used by Ms. Allison.

Teacher Description of Academic Experience

In regard to the academic experience, Ms. Allison described the class to be coursework intensive (reading, writing, and research) and intellectually challenging. Ms. Allison alluded to the intensive nature of the course by describing the many different texts students had to read and dissect for meaning. For example, the instructor gave students a variety of genres to read in which they had to figure out what the author did, the techniques that were used, and develop an argument based on the given documents. Ms. Allison said, "They have to think deeper into a text than they have ever done before." Students were challenged intellectually because they often had to think and research both sides of an argument and base their discussions on actual documents, history, and current events. She said, "They reference their texts and they really have to think through things and read through everything." Most of the time students had to look to other sources to get answers to problems and nothing was accepted at face value. Ms. Allison explained, "I use Schoology and I put extra sources and websites they can go to on Schoology so they can back up their answers." Schoology is an online domain that students used for course information and to partake in assignments and discussions specific to their class. Questions with only one right answer were rarely given and students were constantly driven to dig deeper with their responses. She said, "Like with *Gatsby*, we are going over the study guide and even then most questions have multiple answers. Very few are just a cut and dry answer." The academic challenge and coursework intensive nature of the course were deemed the standard for an Advance Placement class.

In sum, Ms. Allison expected students to be independent and college ready. She elaborated on wanting students to find their own way to build a strong level of

independence to better prepare them for college. She said the expectation of college-readiness would be reflected in students becoming open minded critical thinkers, better readers and writers, and capable of researching their own thoughts. Ms. Allison described her students to be a bounded, exclusive group of learners. She said the students were bounded because they were connected in and outside of class through social media and extracurricular activities. She explained that her class was an exclusive group because of a special criterion they fit into in terms of race, socioeconomic status, level of intelligence, and the way in which they did not accept others different than themselves. Her students were mostly White, middle to upper socioeconomic status, and highly intelligent. Ms. Allison described the academic experience to be coursework intensive (reading, writing, and research) and intellectually challenging. She said students often read a variety of texts that required them to dissect for meaning as well as researched topics in which they had to argue both sides.

Advance Placement Language Student Voice

In Advance Placement Language, Andrew was the student who consented to share his learning experience. He played football and baseball for the school. This was his first year in Advance Placement classes, but had been in Honors classes throughout his high school career. He was involved in Beta Club, a community service club offered by the school, and ROTC. He communicated that Ms. Allison was his freshman English teacher and she told him she was teaching Advance Placement Language the current school year. The positive experiences Andrew had with Ms. Allison influenced his decision to register for Advance Placement Language. He willingly accepted the offer to participate in the research study and was very cooperative throughout the process. Andrew was the only

participant from this class because he was the only African American male in the entire class population. Evidenced in the data, he gave responses that painted a clear picture of how he experienced his Advance Placement track English course, elaborating on teacher expectations, discussing peer relationships, and vividly describing his academic experience.

Andrew described his classroom learning experience to be a unique, but positive. He expressed that the course was well rounded because students took part in debates, writing, and group work. He said, "You're going to learn in different ways just about every day." Discussion was a huge part of the course. Andrew communicated that "your opinion will be heard." In fact, the positive nature of the course made Andrew want to take more AP classes in the future. He liked the challenge and believed it would help him in college. He said, "It will help me become a better student, better manage my time, and know what to expect and what kind of work to produce for college."

Teacher Expectations

Andrew explained his teacher expected him to be a distinctive and scholarly intellectual. The term distinctive was characteristic of the interview data because Andrew often alluded to a special quality or style of work that was expected due to the Advance Placement level of the course. He said, "She expects us to start acting like AP students." A display of a scholarly intellectual was a major reoccurring theme because students, in everything they did, had to produce at the master level and display profound knowledge of the studied subject. This was the driving expectation behind all course assignments and activities based on the standard students were held to in the classroom.

Andrew expressed that his teacher expected students to participate, do their work, and write and speak at the AP level. He said, “She wants us to become more creative as an English student.” For example, the teacher gave students a packet of words they could no longer use because they were not considered AP level words. Andrew voiced that assignment quality required students think outside of the box and provide textual proof. He said all answers had to be explained in an AP style format. He expressed that this meant long, textual examples, and citations. Andrew said if students were struggling with a task, the teacher would not give students the answer, but would lead them in the right direction. He said the teacher wants “to let your mind start flowing to get ideas.” However, Andrew expressed, “If you really do not understand, the teacher would help you.”

Student-Peer Relationships

In regard to student-peer relationships, the major themes in the data were expressive, goal-driven partners. This theme was illuminated as Andrew discussed how well students worked together to accomplish tasks, but often were expressive or emotional in their participation. Andrew explained although students were highly motivated to perform well, they were still transparent about their ideas and beliefs, even if it presented an issue to the cohesion of coursework. I used the word partner to describe the relationship Andrew had with his peers. In the realm of classroom activities, the participants could collaborate to achieve a common goal. However, on a deeper level, the participant expressed that he did not feel much of a relationship or connection because of racial differences.

Andrew described his classmates as diverse. This was a reflection of student personality and not race. He said, “We have quiet classmates, outspoken classmates, and classmates that are straight up open about everything.” Andrew deemed the diversity a benefit because it often sparked discussion. He said, “It keeps the discussion going and it never dies.” Andrew expressed that he worked well with all of his classmates. He explained he was “diverse” enough to work with anyone. “I don’t discriminate, not at all.”

Andrew said everyone was motivated to do good work in his class. He expressed students would not have signed up for the class if they were not motivated to do well. He elaborated on this statement by discussing the summer project given to his class. He said, “If you didn’t put in hard work, the summer project would have broken you down before you got into the classroom.” Andrew expressed students often motivated each other to do well in the course. He expressed during group projects students got on each other because they knew there was a certain quality of work that was expected of them. Andrew explained if the product was not up to the teacher’s standards, it would not be accepted or students would get a bad grade. Andrew said students motivated each other the most during class discussions. During this time, Andrew said of his classmates, “we try to root them on and we work together really well.” Group assignments were the extent of student motivation and dependence on each other. For the most part, outside of group assignments, students were independent. Andrew said, “We all just do our own work because we all have different ideas.”

As Andrew mentioned discussion to be a bright area of the classroom dynamic, it was also a contributor of tension among students. Andrew expressed that controversial

topics brought out negative emotions in some students. He called it “taking discussions to heart.” Andrew said, “For instance, we had a discussion on the American dream and a couple of students were getting a little heart founded because we were talking about gay rights and slavery.” Emotional reactions to debates seemed to be a common occurrence during discussions. Andrew said, “When we discuss some people just take it to heart.” He said issues had to be resolved by the teacher due to their intensity. Andrew explained, “She has to come in and stop us because if nobody stops us we’ll go all day long.” Andrew explained the intensity of debates was justified by students having a certain drive. Later in the interview, Andrew said that intense moments were attributed by student stubbornness.

Andrew discussed in depth his connectedness to his classmates. He mentioned, on a surface level, he was connected to a few students outside of class mainly through sports. On a deeper level, it was hard for him to connect with his classmates being the only African American male in his class. He said, “Sometimes I feel like I am a target because some of my views, they don’t take it the way I see it. I mean me being the only African American male, I’ve grown up differently.” He further commented on how he was raised by his parents and the different lifestyles between him and his classmates. He said, “My parents have instilled a lot of things in me and they’ve told me that things were probably going to be a little bit harder on me growing up.” Andrew expressed that the different views between him and his classmates were a cause of them not fully understanding the reality of life, a shortcoming because their parents have sheltered them. Based on his reality of having a tougher path to success, Andrew believed there was pressure on him to do well. He said, “I want to feel like I can do it at this level with all

the other people." He clarified that there was not pressure from others, but himself. It was a goal he wanted to achieve to prove that he was good enough, intellectually smart enough to perform at the highest level. He said, "This was my choice. I circled it on the paper. It's my own battle." Andrew voiced support from other African American males would be nice, but that is rare in Advance Placement courses. He said, "I don't know if it is a personal doubt or they are afraid to see what the people are going to say." He added, "I don't think they are ready for diversity. Some people are just use to being in certain crowds and in certain instances; African American males are usually used to being around African American people." Contrary to his belief about his African American male peers, Andrew believed he was confident enough to navigate the diverse classroom. He believed he had to be in order to be successful. Andrew said, "I'm trying to get to college and get a career. So, I'm going to do whatever it takes as far as education. I'm taking the classes I need to take."

Academic Experience

Andrew described his academic experience to be rigorous and multifaceted. A rigorous academic experience was often mentioned as the participant discussed the challenging aspects of the course. The academic experience, as Andrew voiced, consisted of a multitude of challenging tasks. The usual assignments were novel readings, study guides, annotations, writing, and argumentative or rhetorical analyses. He communicated that the activities and skills worked on were in preparation for the Advance Placement exam in May. Collaborative assignments, debates, and Socratic seminars were also usual happenings within the class. Each assignment or activity was designed to push the intellectual abilities of the students. Andrew explained the students had to move beyond

the surface level of learning. In fact, he said the teacher hardly ever asked questions of students that only had one right answer. He expressed the only time one right answer was accepted was when the teacher asked literal comprehension types of questions. Andrew said, "Like, we were reading *A Raisin in the Sun* and they were talking about the check, when it was coming in. It's coming on Saturday. That's like the only time there is a basic answer." Andrew voiced, "Other than that, in-depth responses backed by textual support were the expectation." He explained that answers varied as the teacher wanted to know individual student perspectives.

Andrew deemed the senior paper as the most challenging assignment of the class. He expressed the process to be overwhelming because he had never conducted research or written a paper that was seven to 10 pages in length. Andrew said, "I've never written a paper longer than three pages before in my life. I had to find information, even if I didn't use it." Andrew mentioned other than the research requirements of the senior paper, students did not have to look to other sources to complete classroom assignments. He said the teacher, for the most part, usually provided students with all of the resources they needed to complete assignments. Andrew explained if students needed additional information on a topic, the teacher was the go to for data. He said, "She was the reliable source."

Andrew said his academic experience encompassed everything needed in an English class. He said, "We're going to learn grammar, we are going to learn how to write, we are going to read English pieces, nonfiction pieces, and we're going to learn a little bit of history too." Andrew mentioned that the well rounded nature of the course has given him full academic satisfaction. He said, "It's a good course. I like it." He further

added that the various aspects of the course were instrumental in his future success. He said, “I think that taking this AP class will prepare me and my classmates better for when we get to college than other students.”

In sum, Andrew expressed that his teacher expected him to be distinctive and scholarly. Distinctive was characteristic of a special quality or style of work Andrew said Ms. Allison expected because of the Advance Placement level of the course. He said he was expected to be scholarly because everything he produced had to be at the master level and show profound knowledge of the studied subject. In regards to student relationships, Andrew described his classmates as expressive, goal-driven partners. He voiced that his peers were expressive or emotional in their participation in course activities, but worked well together in accomplishing course required tasks. On a deeper social level, it was a challenge for Andrew to relate to his peers, mainly because he was the only African American male in his class. Andrew described the academic experience to be rigorous and multifaceted. He discussed every task having its own challenging aspect and participating in a variety of activities such as novel readings, argumentative and rhetorical analyses, and Socratic seminars.

Advance Placement Language Teacher-Student Data Comparison

Descriptions of the classroom experience were similar between Ms. Allison and Andrew. Ms. Allison expressed that she expected students to be independent and college ready. She described college readiness as students being open minded critical thinkers, better readers and writers, and having the ability to research any given topic. Similarly, Andrew asserted that Ms. Allison expected him to be distinctive and scholarly. Andrew explained that students had to be distinctive in that they had to set themselves apart as AP

level students, emphasizing a special quality or style of work. This meant thinking outside of the box, long, textual examples, and citations. In regards to scholarly, Andrew explained that students were expected to produce at the master level and display profound knowledge of the studied subject. In a sense, the described expectations of Andrew fit into the criteria of Ms. Allison's expectations of being college ready.

In regard to student-peer relationships, Ms. Allison and Andrew differed in their descriptions. Ms. Allison described her class to be a bounded and exclusive group of students. She conveyed that the students were a bounded group because they were connected in and outside of class. She said they traveled from class to class together and were used to each other. Further, she expressed students were motivators of each other academically and connected outside of class through social media, sports, and social circles. Ms. Allison described her class as an exclusive group because her students fit into a certain 'criteria,' White, middle to upper socioeconomic status, and high intellectual abilities. Contrarily, Andrew characterized his relationship with his peers as expressive, goal-driven partners. This description was highlighted as Andrew discussed how well students worked together to accomplish tasks, but often were expressive or emotional in their participation in class discussions. Andrew explained that his relationship with his peers encompassed being transparent about ideas and beliefs, even if it presented an issue to the group's cohesion. Although students were vocal about their thoughts and ideas, Andrew described a partner-like relationship. He mentioned that students were academically invested and collaborated to achieve a common goal, constantly motivating each other to do well in course activities. However, on a deeper level, Andrew did not connect with his peers. He mentioned that his race, points of view, and differences in how

students grew up were barriers to a stronger relationship. I believe the things that Ms. Allison mentioned to make the students an exclusive group distanced Andrew from them. I do not think he totally fit into their criteria, which made him socially distant from them.

The academic experience described by Ms. Allison and Andrew were similar. Ms. Allison described the academic experience to be coursework intensive (reading, writing, and research) and intellectually challenging. Ms. Allison explained that students had to read many texts and dissect for meaning throughout the course. She expressed that she challenged students intellectually by forcing them to research both sides of an argument, basing their discussions on documents, history, and current events. She also voiced that she rarely asked questions with one right answer, constantly pushing students to dig deep with their responses. Similarly, Andrew described the academic experience to be rigorous and multifaceted. He mentioned a multitude of challenging tasks required of his Advance Placement Language class. He voiced that the usual assignments were novel readings, study guides, annotations, writing, and argumentative or rhetorical analyses. He expressed that Ms. Allison pushed him past the surface level of learning, hardly ever requesting answers from him that had one right answer. It was apparent that the academic experience was a reflection of the teacher's expectations of the students. I believe Ms. Allison positioned her students to be successful in reaching their goal of being college ready by aligning all course activities with that vision in mind. See Table 11 for a comparison of teacher and student data.

Table 11: Advance placement language teacher-student data comparison

Advance Placement Language		
Teacher		**Student**
Independent College-Ready	**Teacher Expectations**	Distinctive Scholarly
Bounded Exclusive	**Student-Peer Relationships**	Expressive Goal-Driven Partners Socially Distant
Coursework Intensive (Reading, Writing, Research)	**Academic Experience**	Rigorous Multifaceted

Advance Placement Literature

Teacher Background

Ms. Anderson, an economics and English degree holder, has been teaching at Southwest High for 12 years. Her career here began after she received her teaching license from a state university in North Carolina and ended a several year stint teaching at the Pre-K level. Her first years at Southwest were dedicated to teaching ninth and 10th grade regular English classes. Ms. Anderson expressed her feelings on her placement. She said, "For some reason that's what we tend to do with new teachers, throw them into the worst classes you could ever have." After demonstrating that she was capable of teaching well, she was granted the opportunity to teach Honors ninth and 10th grade English. During her teaching tenure, Ms. Anderson decided to become certified in Advance Placement Language and Advance Placement Literature. Upon completion of the two Advance Placement certifications, she was moved to teach 11th grade Advance Placement Language, where she would teach for several years. The current school year would mark her second year teaching Advance Placement Literature for seniors. Ms. Anderson's teaching responsibilities included teaching ACT Prep along with training

teachers so they could help with the course. Ms. Anderson stressed the importance of the ACT, a college entrance exam taken by most high school students in the state. She said, "That's the big test all across the state and for the kids to go to college." In addition to teaching, she was previously involved as a National Honor Society advisor and was a Students Supporting Our Troops advisor. Ms. Anderson believes that the current climate of teaching is, "let the kids through, do whatever you have to do." However, she insisted that she was not into babying students because they ultimately have to go to college and that is her teaching philosophy. The following sections will uncover, based on teacher interview data, Ms. Anderson's expectations for students, her description of the student-peer relationships within her classroom, and her description of the Advance Placement Literature academic experience.

Course/Classroom Context

Advance Placement Literature was taught by Ms. Anderson, a White woman in her fifties. The class was composed of 17 students. Three of the 17 students were African American and only one of the three was male. Students were seated in rows facing the classroom SMART board. To the left of the board was the teacher's desk and to the right was an easily accessible cart of laptops for students to use at their convenience. The classroom walls were nearly bare with few posters around the room. The word *Tolerance* was posted with the quote, "When you lose the right to be different, you lose the right to be free. Know it, learn it." *Perseverance* was also visible with the quote, "It's the difference between possible and impossible." Another poster read, *Citizenship*, "volunteer, vote, participate; take an active role." These were messages that the teacher instilled in her students. Other posters around the room were of popular book covers.

However, most of the blank space on the wall was reserved for university acceptance letters; the highest accomplishment of students enrolled in Ms. Anderson's class. There was large orange bulletin board paper plastered in the back of the classroom. On it, several acceptance letters from regional universities such as Citadel, Wingate, North Carolina State University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and Davidson among other colleges could be found. There was still orange space left for students awaiting acceptance from schools that they may have recently applied. This bulletin spoke volumes to the college standard in the classroom. The bulletin, in a way, validated the nakedness of the walls to further highlight what was of most importance to the classroom, college acceptance.

Teacher Expectations

Ms. Anderson expected her students to be college ready and to think independently. College readiness was the main priority of the course. Ms. Anderson said, "Everything is for college and to ultimately pass the Advance Placement Literature exam so they can get college credit." The standard of college readiness was accompanied by various skills students had to obtain to meet the expectations of the course. For example, college style writing was a focus in the course in which students had to adhere to the MLA format. Ms. Anderson made it clear that students were "going to pay attention ultimately to spelling, grammar, and conventions, and the things in society that we let go" in terms of writing. The expectation was for students to treat writing as a process, steps taken before the finished product. Ms. Anderson said, "The work needs to be a quality that if someone else reads it they can say, wow this is really good." Although writing was tested in a three hour block for the Advance Placement test, Ms. Anderson said she spent

more time on the writing process because the College Board says teach it as a process. Ms. Anderson voiced, "I want them to be prepared for college." To further prepare for college, Ms. Anderson expected students to explain their answers to questions in great depth. Students had to explain all of their answers with an example. Ms. Anderson said, "I want them to take it to actual text and bring it into their writing and themselves, too." She further explained that examples, text citations for support, and connections to the students' lives were norms in student responses.

As previously mentioned, independent thinking students was a major theme in the data. If students were struggling with a task or in answering a question, Ms. Anderson would usually say, "What do you think or why don't you think about it." Her style was to allow students to struggle with assignments and questions to improve their independent thinking. Ms. Anderson said she knew her style frustrated students because she believed that "a lot of their schooling has been to learn something, spit it back at the teacher, and get an A." However, she wanted students to understand that in literature there is not one answer. She said she conveyed to students that all they have to do is explain what they got out of the text. Ms. Anderson insisted that nobody could tell her students they were wrong as long as they adequately explained their answers. She said, "I tell them, I'm not trying to make 25 Ms. Anderson's in here, I want you to be able to think for yourself." In sum, the responses from Ms. Anderson on expectations for students were driven by a standard of independent thinking and college readiness.

Teacher Description of Student/Peer Relationships

Competition was the major theme that categorized student relationships in Ms. Anderson's class. Ms. Anderson said despite their ability to work well together, the

competitive nature of the class overshadowed how students functioned within the course. She said students, due to their competitiveness, had to be taught how to work together as an effective unit. She further said, “They work pretty well after some training and encouraging and explaining how to work in groups.” As Ms. Anderson expressed, this group of students was more motivated overall by their class ranking. She said, “They are worried about who is going to be number one or number two. Who’s got this A in the class and who doesn’t.” As a result, the students did not like to depend on each other. Ms. Anderson characterized the students as “self absorbed.” She said, “As a matter of fact, sometimes when I say we are going to work in pairs, they say can I work alone.” Ms. Anderson expressed that problems were minimal within the classroom, but the competitiveness of students contributed to a somewhat jealous environment. She said, “They have that under-jealousy thing if someone does better. They will make comments.” In some cases, Ms. Anderson expressed students interpreted their peers being nice to the teacher as a strategy to get better grades. She said, “They perceive it that way so they say he’s sucking up and whatever he gets…I say not in my class.” The competitive nature of the students played a major role in how they interacted with each other within the classroom. However, Ms. Anderson noted that the students were well connected and close outside of the course requirements.

Teacher Description of Academic Experience

In regard to academic experience, Ms. Anderson described her class to be analysis intensive and Advance Placement test preparatory. The abovementioned themes were often alluded to in Ms. Anderson’s responses to the academic activities that students were often exposed to within the daily requirements of the course. Ms. Anderson voiced the

analytic tasks would ultimately prepare students for the final Advance Placement exam, which would also prepare students for college. For example, students would be prompted to do journals as one of their usual assignments. Ms. Anderson said, "The journal would be responding to a quote and analyzing it in terms of something they read because that is the third question on the AP test." Ms. Anderson believed if students were constantly doing journal writings that required such an analysis, they would be prepared for the test at the end of the year. She said, "I figure if we do it during the year, by the end of the year they will remember all of these books and that will be part of their writing response."

In addition to analytical writing, students were prompted to read with an analytical lens. Ms. Anderson insisted that she could not always be the one that interpreted the text, but the students had to know how to interpret. To enhance their analytical abilities, Ms. Anderson gave students critical reading questions while they read. She said, "If you look at them they are inference type questions, predicting, comparison and contrast. They're not what did such and such say on line 25." In another assignment, referenced as the song assignment, students had to pick a song, research the composer, apply a biographical lens in which they had to determine how the composer's life was illustrated in the song, and then analyze the piece for tone, diction, and figurative language. Ms. Anderson explained students, while reading, were usually prompted to address the abovementioned literary devices. She said in their analyses, students, in most cases, had to look to other sources to make connections with the real world in their responses. The course assignments were ultimately designed to enhance students'

analytical abilities and prepare them for the Advance Placement exam at the end of the course.

In sum, Ms. Anderson expected students to be college ready and think independently. She explained college-readiness consisted of being a strong writer, adhering to MLA format, and being able to answer questions in great depth with textual support. She wanted students to build their independence and construct their own voice. She described her students as competitive. Ms. Anderson insisted that students were more focused on class rank than anything else. She explained that student eagerness to do better than others created a jealous classroom environment. In regard to academic experience, Ms. Anderson described her class to be analysis intensive and Advance placement preparatory. She explained that increased analytical exposure would prepare students for the final Advance Placement exam. As a result, Ms. Anderson required students to do journals that resembled questions from the AP exam and often gave them readings that were accompanied by critical reading questions. Ms. Anderson said students would wrestle with questions that prompted them to infer, question, predict, and compare and contrast. In other instances, she would have students analyze a piece of literature for tone, diction, and figurative language.

Advance Placement Literature Student Voice

In Advance Placement Literature, Anthony was the student who consented to share his learning experience. He played football and ran track for the school. He communicated he was going to attend Citadel in the Fall where he would major in Health, Sports, and Natural Sciences with a minor in Spanish. At school, he was involved in the National Honors Society and Beta Club. He said, “I really take it upon myself to go out

and learn and take initiative and do my best in all my classes so I can succeed in life." Anthony willingly accepted the offer to participate in the research study and was very cooperative throughout the process. Anthony was the only participant from this class because he was the only African American male in the entire class population. Evidenced in the data, he gave responses that painted a clear picture of how he experienced his Advance Placement track English course, elaborating on teacher expectations, discussing peer relationships, and vividly describing his academic experience.

Teacher Expectations

The major theme in the category of teacher expectations was college readiness. Anthony expressed that the instructor wanted students to be at the next level academically to prepare for college. He said, "She basically treats the class like a college class." In referring to college readiness, Anthony discussed the expected skills, mindsets, and quality of work students were to produce. He expressed that the previously mentioned tools would ultimately create students that were independent and prepared for higher education. He said, "She's basically trying to teach you that in college teachers are not going to hold your hand, you have to take initiative to do your work, and make sure everything is turned in on time." He voiced the quality of work was expected to be "flawless" in nature. He said, "She is pushing us to higher standards." To Anthony, this meant ten page research papers, lots of textual analysis, and MLA citation papers. Textual citations were a major aspect of class assignments. In any answer, whether long or short, Anthony expressed that it was expected for there to be some sort of textual support. He said, "She really puts emphasis on that because when we go to college…she says when you go to college and you're doing a paper you have to have support and you

have to be able to cite." College readiness also meant being able to speak in an effective manner. The expectation was for students to speak, whether in responses or asking questions, affirmatively. Anthony said, "She says you have to have those affirmative mannerisms to communicate effectively with other people." As evidenced in the data, everything done in class was driven by the expectation of college readiness. Students were put in a position to see themselves as college students. The expectations of the course allowed students to feel the many requirements of college were feasible given their developed skills. Anthony said, "She really pushed us above and beyond our goals."

Student-Peer Relationships

Anthony described his classmates to be an elite, goal driven group of students that functioned as a professional learning community. Anthony magnified this concept of an elite group of students by communicating that his classmates were top ranked in the school. Although Anthony expressed that his peers were great people, he voiced that their academic status contributed to unnecessary behaviors. He said, "There are not really problems, just the arrogance and snarkiness that comes along with an AP class. AP students tend to believe they are above everyone else, which is not true." As an academically elite group of students, Anthony conveyed that his classmates believed they were superior to others around them. This was a mindset that Anthony said he was not comfortable with and one that he occasionally addressed. He said, "I've had to tell people that they were not above and beyond anyone else." Despite the superior mindsets of his peers, Anthony ruled his classmates to be fine, genuine people.

The academic success of Anthony and his peers was attributed to their ability to be goal driven. Anthony expressed that the members of his class were adamant about

becoming successful, not just in school but beyond. He said, “Everybody wants to get somewhere in life. We all want to go to college, and we all want to make a difference in the world.” This sentiment was reoccurring in the data. Anthony explained that his classmates had a clear vision of what they wanted in their futures and they knew exactly what they needed to do academically to ensure success. Anthony mentioned the goal driven characteristic of the students created somewhat of a competitive atmosphere in the classroom. He explained students were always eager to learn something new or find ways to gain deeper insight about discussed concepts, anything that would give them a competitive advantage intellectually. Anthony mentioned, “Everybody is trying to get something, a piece of the pie and we are all trying to succeed.” This competitive edge had a positive effect on the classroom as a whole. Anthony asserted that students not only wanted to be better individually, but they also wanted their classmates to be on a path of continued academic growth. As a result, the students functioned as a professional learning community in everything they did, whether inside or outside of class.

Anthony expressed that students were positioned to function as a professional learning community as their teacher, in most cases, required collaboration. He said, “She assigns partners so you have to work effectively with other people.” The classroom environment often displayed a structure of collective team work in which leadership and responsibility for learning was fostered. This learning format, as Anthony discussed, brought students closer and triggered a positive level of motivation among students. Everyone had the same educational goals and pushed one another to achieve academically. Anthony said, “We are good motivators because if someone makes a mistake we’re real quick to jump on it to say, hey don’t do that again.” Constructive

criticism was normal as students worked together to conquer rigorous tasks. Anthony said, “Every day was about becoming a better student.” Students were highly invested in their education as well as each other. Anthony asserted, “Everyone has each other’s number so we’ll do a three way call to ask questions and make sure everybody has everything in the right priority.” Anthony said his classmates also used email to remain in contact with each other. Anthony asserted, “If anybody needed anything we were just available.” Students often displayed strong communication, which worked in their favor when adversity would become present. Anthony voiced, “If there is a problem, we will just talk about it and find a solution.” The way students functioned within the classroom was characteristic of a professional learning community; they had a common vision, worked as a team, actively sought solutions, and continuously worked to improve their academic skills.

It is important to mention that Anthony felt, on a deeper level, distant from his classmates. Anthony was the only African American male in his Advance Placement Literature class. For this reason, it was extremely difficult for him to relate to his peers. He said, “I can try to relate to other people, but it’s hard when I’m the only African American male.” Not only was it hard to relate to others beyond the surface level, but it became an issue for Anthony because he was interested in diverse perspectives. In reference to his predominantly White class, Anthony explained, “You don’t have other perspectives at all. You hear the same perspectives all the time.” This was seen as a critical issue for Anthony, for he believed that there should be more diversity in Advance Placement classes.

Academic Experience

Anthony described his academic experience to focus on critical reading and writing. He expressed the usual assignments consisted of reading and analysis. Anthony said students knew that assignments would require them to read a text, analyze the content, and formulate a response using details from the literature. Anthony said, "She gives a lot of analysis work, your reading project, what you do after you read a certain book." Novel studies, mostly British literature, were the focus of the course. Anthony said the novel studies included a critique of the text, an analysis of the author's biographical lens, and a response to an essential question or focus. He explained that reading responses could have a variety of answers, but needed to be rooted in textual evidence. He said, "She'll put up different questions and you'll have to write about it as a focus, but you have to take examples from life and literature and apply it to the question and you have to support it." Anthony communicated that in some instances students had to refer to other sources to answer questions. He said, "Some questions you can answer automatically and just need one book, but then there are some questions where you have to ask multiple people and use several books." Anthony explained being able to think at high levels and communicate effectively was the purpose of the many analytical assignments. He said, "It's not an option. It's mandatory that you communicate effectively." Anthony felt his academic experience would ultimately allow him to obtain the tools needed to be college ready. He believed securing the skills needed to analyze a text and communicate a response effectively would be the foundation of his academic success.

In sum, Anthony voiced his teacher expected him to be college ready. He explained that college-readiness was being independent, producing high quality work, textual analysis and citations, and being able to effectively communicate. Anthony described his classmates as an elite, goal driven group that functioned as a professional learning community. As Anthony explained, they functioned as a professional learning community because they shared a common vision, worked as a team, actively sought solutions, and continuously worked to improve their academic skills. Although Anthony expressed a great academic relationship with his peers, socially he did not feel connected because he was the only African American male in his class. He said this created a barrier in building a relationship beyond a surface level because he could not relate to anyone in the class. In regards to the academic experience, Anthony said his class focused on critical reading and writing. He voiced the usual assignments required him to read a text, analyze the content, and formulate a response using details from the literature.

Advance Placement Literature Teacher-Student Data Comparison

The classroom experiences described by Ms. Anderson and Anthony were somewhat similar. They were aligned in descriptions of teacher expectations and academic experience, but differed in the category of student-peer relationships. I believe having similar descriptions of teacher expectations and academic experience was a testament to a clear goal established in the class of where students should be academically and being intentional about all classroom activities to meet the established goal. Ms. Anderson and Anthony described the expectations of the course to be characterized by independence and college readiness. These expectations were described by this teacher and student as producing college style writing, being critical readers,

establishing individual student voice, and communicating effectively. I believe these expectations were the driving force behind the academic experience which will be discussed later in this section.

In regards to student-peer relationships, Ms. Anderson described the students as competitive. She expressed the students were most concerned about class rank and who had what grade in the class. Although students worked well together, they preferred to work alone. Ms. Anderson mentioned the competitive nature of the class played a major role in how students interacted with each other and brought about a jealous environment. Contrarily, Anthony characterized his peers as an elite, goal driven group of students who functioned as a professional learning community. Anthony expressed students were elite because they were top ranked in the school. He explained their ranks allowed them to think they were superior to others around them, a mindset he was uncomfortable with and one he occasionally addressed. Despite their superior mindsets, Anthony saw his classmates as fine, genuine people. He communicated his classmates usually showcased the abovementioned traits through their academic support, always pushing each other to new heights academically. He expressed everyone was goal driven and wanted to be successful. As a result, they often functioned as a professional learning community, demonstrating collective teamwork, leadership, and motivation to complete a task or achieve a goal. Although Anthony connected with his peers academically, he could not relate socially. He mentioned it was a challenge to relate to his peers because he was the only African American male in his class.

In regard to the academic experience, Ms. Anderson and Anthony had similar descriptions. Ms. Anderson described the academic experience to be analysis intensive

and Advance Placement preparatory. She explained students had to read everything with a critical lens followed by an analysis. She explained readings were accompanied by questions that required students to infer, predict, and compare and contrast the text content. Ms. Anderson also prompted students to do journals that were representative of questions on the Advance Placement test. The journals would be responding to a quote and analyzing it terms of something the students read. Similarly, Anthony described the academic experience to focus on critical reading and writing. Comparative to Ms. Anderson, Anthony expressed assignments required students to read a text, analyze the content, and formulate a response using details from the literature. I believe the alignment of learning experiences described by Anthony and Ms. Anderson was a testament to how deeply rooted classroom expectations were within the classroom culture. It was clear that activities were geared toward the greater goals of the class to create intellectually independent, college ready students. See Table 12 for a comparison of teacher and student data.

Table 12: Advance placement literature teacher-student data comparison

Advance Placement Literature		
Teacher		**Student**
Independent College-Ready	**Teacher Expectations**	College-Read
Competitive	**Student-Peer Relationships**	Elite, Goal-Driven Professional Learning Community Socially Distant
Analysis Intensive AP Test Preparatory	**Academic Experience**	Critical Reading & Writing

Cross-Case Comparative Analysis

The data have illuminated the unique classroom dynamics of Standard, Honors, and Advance Placement English tracks through the lens of the African American male participants. Through their voices, themes have been developed that shed light on the differential experiences each track placement offers. Interview data have revealed how these students function within their English tracks, with whom, and what drives learning in their particular course. The purpose of the following section will be to conduct a cross-case analysis of each English track to explore how they compare in regards to teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and academic experience.

Teacher Expectations

As students moved across English tracks, in particular Standard to Advance Placement, I discovered an increase in teacher expectations. Not only were expectations for students higher as English track placement became more advanced, but the expectations became more specific. The Standard track students described expectations that were characterized by vague language that often left them without clear academic direction. The participants in the Standard track expressed that their teacher expected them to be attentive and complete all assignments. Because this language is vague and a reflection of low expectations, it did not set students up for success because it did not give them a clear direction of how they should have been thinking or functioning within the classroom environment. The potential cost of such vague expectations is a classroom of students with idle minds and a lack of investment in course material. As the Standard participants described their teacher's expectations, it became clear to me that they were ultimately unclear of what was expected. Initially, all of the students communicated that

their teacher expected them to be "good students." When they further explained what a 'good student' was, they said it was a student who pays attention and completes the coursework. Scott, a Standard track participant, explained, "Like everything completed. Like no unanswered questions or blank spaces. That's about it." These expectations did not support student intellectual growth in the same way as expectations in the Honors and Advance Placement courses because they implied that learning was an act of doing without being accompanied by the act of thinking. It is apparent to me that the teacher had lower expectations for her students than other teachers. These expectations were influenced by the 'standard' label of the course, suggesting that basic skills such as listening and assignment completion were the appropriate level of instruction for these students. I believe the expectations were a reflection of independent, quiet work, which insinuates that the expectations were developed to keep order in the classroom. The data show the teacher believed if students were not occupied by a structured task, off-task behaviors would ensue. Ms. Smith communicated that the students lacked self-control to stay focused on academic tasks when they were given freedom to work without her guidance. She said students got off task easily, usually talking and laughing when they were supposed to be working. The expectations were representative of a safe way to operate a classroom with students whom were believed to be incapable of functioning with academic freedom.

The teacher expectations conveyed by the Honors track participants were more specific in nature than the Standard track participants. The Honors track participants said their teacher expected them to be advanced, intellectually independent, and ground their work in evidence. These expectations provided students with more direction as to how

they should act and think within their course. The Honors participants explained that the expectation of being advanced was established to ensure students functioned at a higher level than their Standard peers. To them, this meant being academically focused, providing answers with more substance, and communicating better. Harrison, an Honors participant, stated, "At the end of the day, he (Mr. Harris) thinks that Honors kids are smarter. That's why he expects more." The participants further expressed that the expectation of intellectual independence was instituted by their teacher because he wanted them to take control over their own learning. Howard, an Honors student, said, "What he (Mr. Harris) wants to see is how a person thinks as an individual so that if there is something wrong we can work on it." I interpreted this independence to differ from the Standard track participants because it prompted students to think for themselves, rather than the expectation of students to regurgitate the thoughts of the teacher. Lastly, the participants expressed that their teacher expected them to ground their responses in evidence. This expectation was more specific than the assignment completion expectation of Standard track students. This expectation prompted students to actively think more about the content they encountered than the previously discussed Standard track. Howard said, "He tells us to use examples to support why you would think that. At the same time he wants your opinion. He wants you to back it up." It was clear to me there was more specificity in the expectations of students as students moved from Standard to Honors English tracks. The data suggest that as track level advanced, students were expected to allow their thinking to expand more in terms of course content. Not only did the expectations of students increase in specificity, but the expectations of the classroom

moved from an academically passive way of learning, representative of the Standard track, to allow students more freedom in their thinking and actions.

The data show that the teacher expectations of Advance Placement English tracks to be more specific than the Standard and Honors tracks. In fact, Andrew and Anthony conveyed that their classes were driven by the goal of being college-ready. They described college ready as being creative, thinking outside of the box, and constructing responses that were long, had textual support, and included citations. Anthony said these expectations were going to prepare him for college. He said, "When you go to college and you're doing a paper you have to support and have to be able to cite." I believe the goal driven expectations allowed students to see themselves as more than high school students, but as college students. The expectations had more direction than the Standard and Honors classes and allowed students to see the purpose behind the many components of their course. I believe that these students were better prepared to succeed in their English courses because they knew exactly what was expected of them. The expectations were specific, unlike the vague expectations of the lower English tracks. Figure 1 shows the increase of teacher expectations between English tracks.

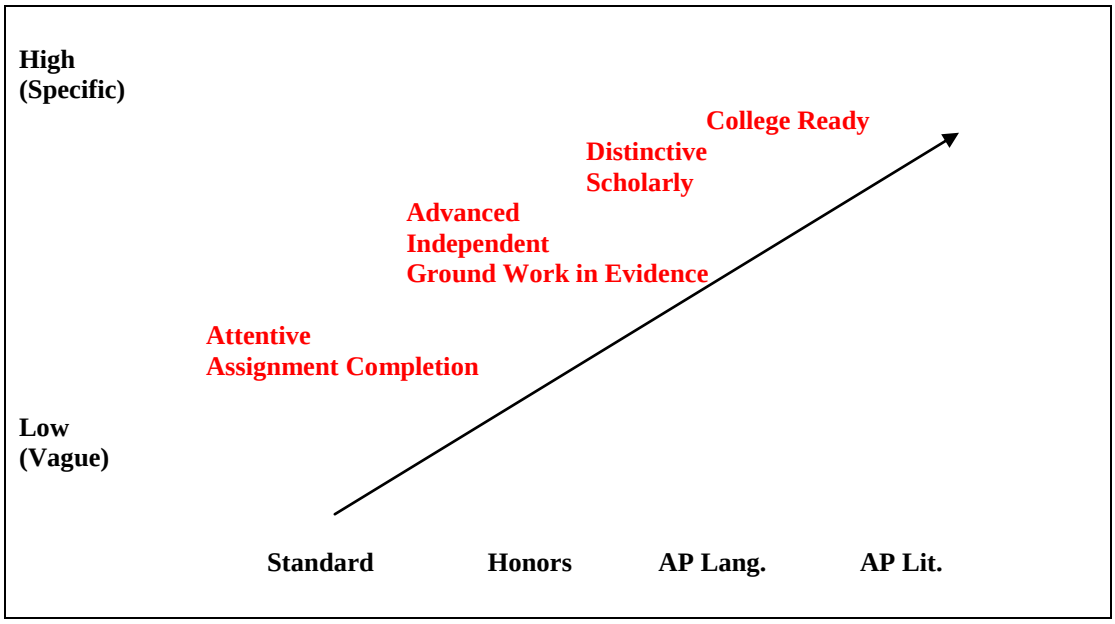

Figure 1: Teacher expectations

Student Peer-Relationships

As I looked over the data and examined the student-peer relationships, it was clear there were costs associated with being assigned to a specific English track, whether high or low. I believe each cost represented a form of isolation endured by each of the participants. More specifically, the costs were associated with academic interaction and racial isolation. I found that as students moved across English tracks, Standard to Advance Placement, the level of academic interaction increased. Standard track students functioned more independently with tasks such as worksheets and writing exercises, whereas Honors and Advance Placement tracks functioned more collaboratively. Sam, a Standard track student, said, "Everyone just does their own thing. For the most part, everybody is just independent." In the Honors track, Harrison said, "He'll (Mr. Harris) tell us to get in groups, but we don't have to. He'll say sometimes you can do this individually or in a group." The Honors English track showed an increase in academic interaction, students were more often given a choice whether they would work in groups

or independently. As I examined the Advance Placement tracks, I found that collaborative tasks were more of a requirement than a choice. Anthony, an Advance Placement student, said, "We work well with each other all the time because our teacher assigns assignments that require collaboration so we have to work together." It seems that differential measures of collaboration and purposeful academic interaction between tracks was intentionally designed for a larger purpose that I will later address in this section. In sum, Standard track students experienced an isolated academic experience, a cost of being assigned to the Standard track, in which they rarely functioned with their classmates to complete tasks. Contrarily, advanced tracks made collaboration an important part of their curriculum in which student functioned together to achieve a common goal.

Racial isolation was a cost advanced track participants in this study experienced for increased academic interaction and academic quality. Although Standard track students did not experience high levels of academic interaction, they did not have to worry about the issue of race. The Standard track participants expressed that they were in a diverse class with students from all racial backgrounds. The students spoke positively about the diversity in their classroom. Sean said, "The diversity helps because there are different cultures in the classroom. They have different ways of doing and learning things." Scott further pointed out that being African American in his class did not impact his relationship with his peers. He said, "Everybody gets along." Sam said, "We don't go into race." However, the data suggest that for students in the Honors and Advance Placement track classes, issues of race became a problem. I observed that these classes were not diverse like the Standard English track. The Honors track had only three African

Americans males in the class and the Advance Placement tracks each had only one African American male. These students expressed feeling detached and isolated from their peers. In Honors, Harrison expressed that he felt "outnumbered" by his White counterparts and often felt like the lack of diversity contributed to him being misunderstood by his peers, communicating that he only connected with Henry because he "gets" him. Henry communicated a similar battle within the Honors track feeling detached from his peers. He voiced, "Since you are a Black person they'll think you are not supposed to be in there." Both participants expressed they were often stereotyped, and Henry even voiced that "some of them don't even look at you," referring to his White counterparts. In the Advance Placement track, Andrew and Anthony also mentioned this idea of detachment and isolation because they were the only African American males in their classrooms. Andrew conveyed sentiments of being a "target" because his peers often did not understand his views. He knew there was a divide between him and his peers because they grew up differently, communicating a difference in opportunity and a tougher path to success than his White counterparts. Like Andrew, Anthony also struggled with getting his classmates to see his perspective. In fact, Anthony voiced that there were no other perspectives at all. "You hear the same perspectives all the time." He voiced that he tried to relate to his peers, "but it's hard when I'm the only African American male." I believe the data show a trade-off of a good education for a racially imbalanced and unstable classroom for advance track African American male students. Figures 2 and 3 show the level of academic interaction and racial isolation experienced in each English track.

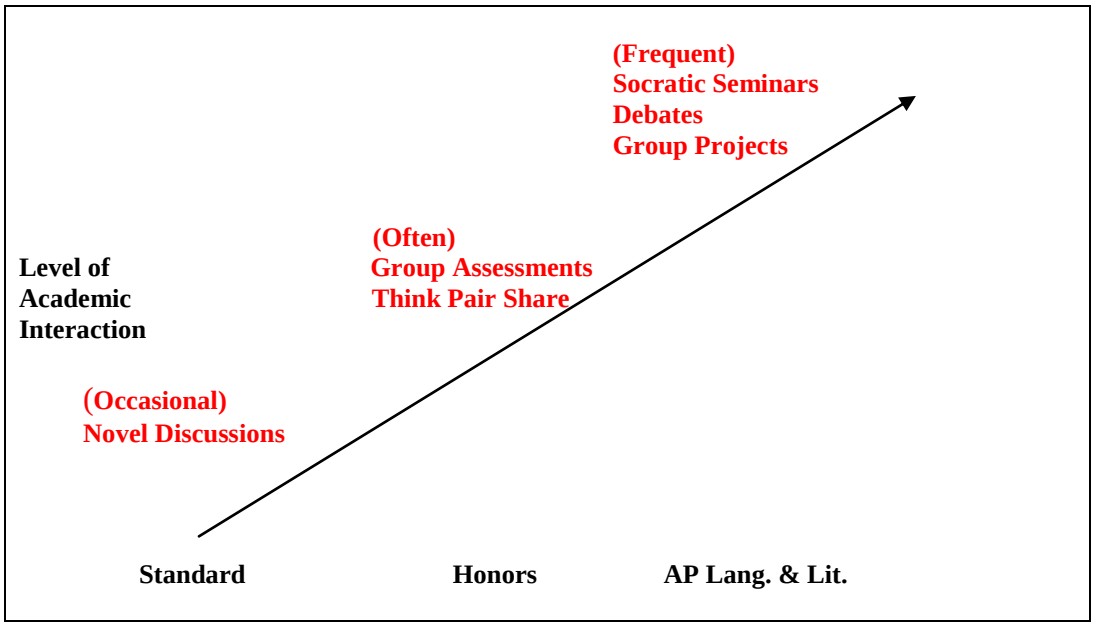

Figure 2: Student peer-relationships: Level of academic interaction

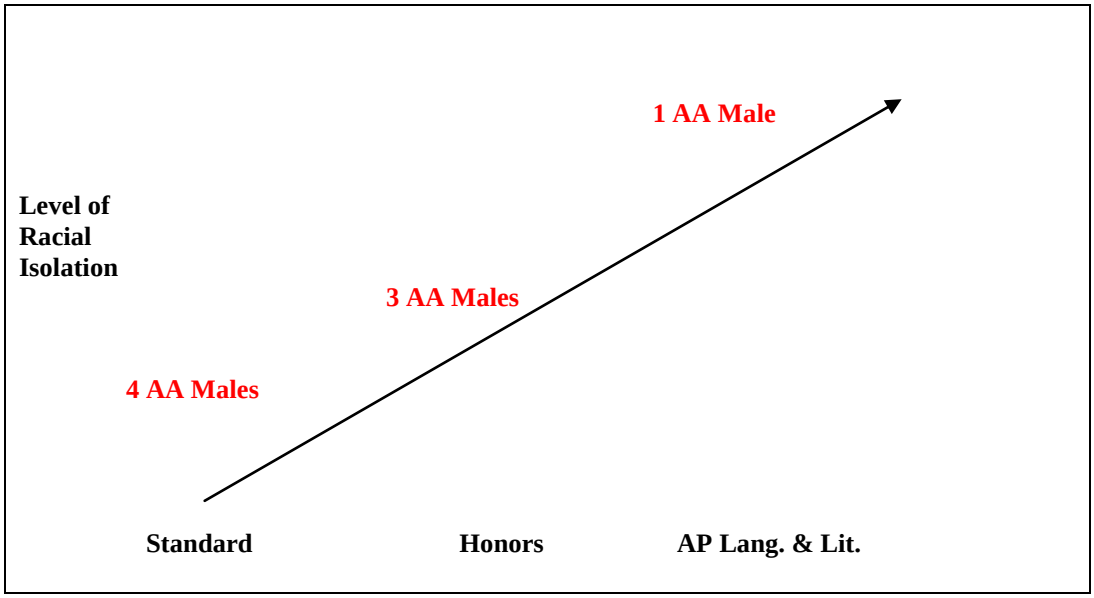

Figure 3: Student-peer relationships: Level of racial isolation

Academic Experience

As I examined the data on academic experience, I found that the English tracks moved from passive learning to a more active learning experience for students. The

students in the Standard track described an academic experience that was characterized by thinking from the perspective of the teacher, rote learning, reading without purpose, and doing only what was expected to get a good grade. However, as English tracks became more advanced, the more students participated in active learning. Students in the Honors and Advance Placement tracks were encouraged to think independently, develop their own voice, and write information in their own words. In addition, the advance track students were encouraged to critically examine and question course material, they were prompted to study novels for significance and deeper meaning, and they were pushed to expand their knowledge and experience with course topics. I believe students in the advanced tracks were better prepared to be successful in higher education than the Standard track students because of their academic experience. I think the passive learning experienced by the Standard track students has consequences for higher education. Students who have not had experience with active learning such as debates, discussion, and critical thinking engendered in Honors and Advance Placement courses may find themselves less prepared for college. I believe this fits into the scheme of marginalizing African American males so that their futures are predictable and characterized by few opportunities.

The data suggest that students in the Standard English track were denied access to instructional methods that would foster the necessary academic challenge to advance their intellectual abilities in the way Honors and Advance Placement students were. Scott described the Standard track as easy in difficulty level and expressed that it felt like a review class. He said, “The stuff in there I already know from the past. She’s teaching it again so I just pick up stuff.” Sean said, “The work is usually easy and fun to do. We get

the information." The academic challenge necessary to advance students intellectually was minimal within the Standard track. Rather than pushing students to think critically about concepts, it seemed that students were kept at an academically safe place in which both teacher and students were successful in the mastering of simple concepts. Sean explained, "When I go home I have time to relax because I usually get my work done early and I don't have much to do." He further went on to say, "She doesn't ask much from me." It was evident that students lacked the mental challenge that would force them to thoroughly dissect concepts and think about them in various ways. I believe the lack of rigor within the Standard track academic experience created a culture of mediocrity and a habit of students thinking on the surface about topics and concepts. Consequently, students may be limited in their academic growth and ability to think critically.

Standard track participants described writing exercises that were disconnected from lesson objectives, activities that were grounded in rote learning, and reading projects that did not require them to become immersed in the text through analysis and synthesis. The data were reminiscent of the literature as Standard tracks are described to have content difficulty that was likely to be delivered in the form of basic literacy skills within disembodied reading and writing tasks, and simple, low-level texts (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). The Standard English course was a reflection of the aforementioned assertion.

When students entered the classroom they would participate in a writing exercise which prompted them to free write or write about a topic that did not connect with the lesson. In addition, when asked about the usual assignments, the Standard track participants spoke mostly about vocabulary and novel reading. In regard to vocabulary,

Scott said, “We make flashcards. She does when you fill in the blank, matching, and that’s about it.” His words were representative of the other Standard track participants and depicted learning that was surface level and rooted in memorization. This kind of instruction is less likely to equip students for critical thinking, writing, and collaboration needed for success in college and many jobs. In addition to the learning of basic literacy skills, as students read class novels they were prompted to, at the basic level; summarize the text instead of analyzing the content. Sam said, “After every chapter we finish, we have to write a summary about the chapter and then we have a discussion about what was going on in the particular chapter.” I believe the lack of rigor within the Standard track did not position students to grow intellectually or prepare them for the complexities of future grade levels. The course experience was characterized by assignments that required low intellectual demand.

In contrast, Honors and Advance Placement English students described an academic experience that was rigorous and critical in nature. The participants in these tracks were exposed to literature in which they had to write critical responses. In the Honors track, Henry expressed that in responses “you have to explain your opinion and you have to have details and context from the book.” Howard stated, “We may have to read something and then he’ll ask us to write a paragraph about a certain quote out of the book.” Harrison communicated that written responses were serious and required a great level of focus and thinking. He said, “You have to put so much thought into it. You can’t just write something down.” In the Advance Placement tracks, Andrew and Anthony expressed similar academic experiences. Andrew said, “Responses have to be long, have text examples, and have lots of citations.” In his class, Anthony said, “You have to take

examples from life and literature and apply it to the question and you have to support it." The academic experiences explained by the Honors and Advance Placement track students were aligned with the literature in which in high track English classes students study and analyze literature, and write long, complex expository prose (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009).

The Honors and Advance Placement tracks pushed the students to think at high intellectual levels. These classes were grounded in novel studies in which students read but went beyond simply summarizing the text. Anthony explained that the novel studies included a critique of the text, an analysis of the author's biographical lens, and a response to an essential question or focus. This type of novel study was characteristic of the other Advance Placement and Honors classes. Students handled all texts with a critical lens instead of at the basic level of summarization like the Standard track English class. In sum, the academic experiences between English tracks illustrated a contrast of passive and active learning. Standard track students engaged in passive learning while their advance track peers flourished in their active learning setting, broadening their academic skills and knowledge. Figure 4 shows the transition from passive learning to active learning between English tracks.

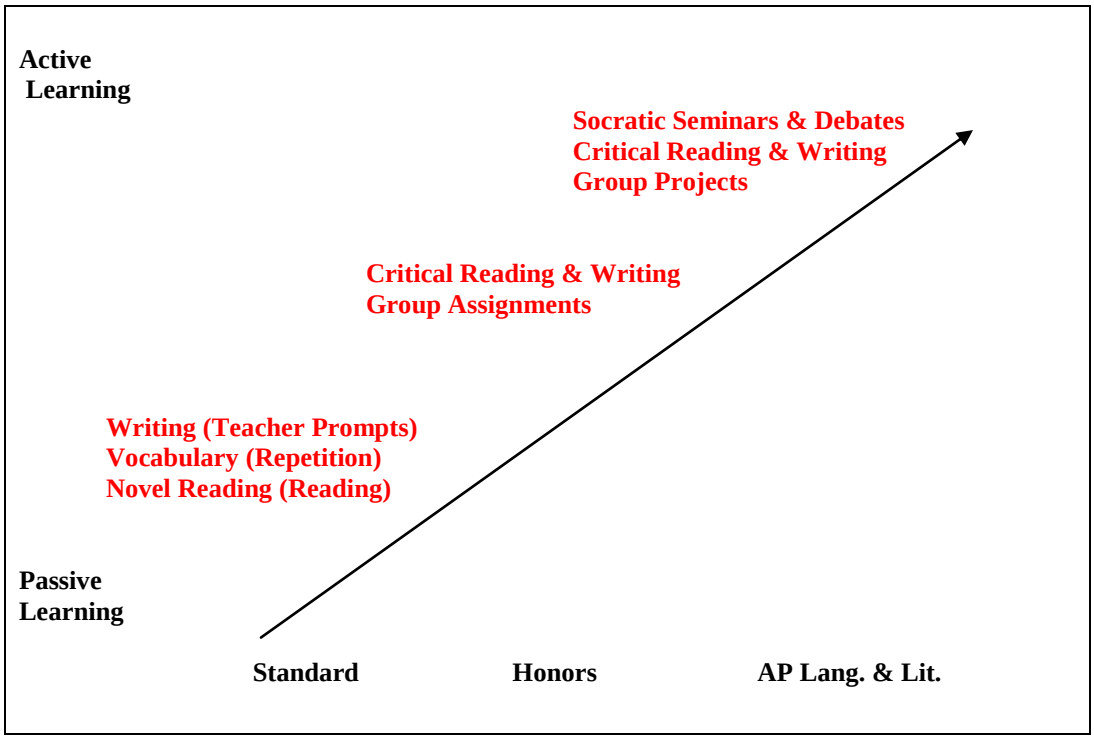

Figure 4: Academic experience

Although it is implied through the study the advanced tracks are more beneficial academically for the African American male participants, a deeper examination suggests the advanced tracks were more problematic because they forced the African American male students to choose between a better academic experience and a sense of cultural belonging. From the perspective of Critical Race Theory, conflicts the African American males experienced within the realm of their classrooms were intentional to sustain inequities for people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Thus, the way schools are organized function as a system to maintain White supremacy, deterring African Americans from positioning themselves in domains that would materialize into progress and future success (Ladson-Billings, 1999). It seemed if African American male students chose what they believed to be the better academic experience over cultural belonging, which the advanced track students in this study did, they had to endure the conflict of

being different, overcoming dominant perspectives that silenced their own, and the battle of not conforming to the dominant group at the expense of their own cultural identity. The advanced track participants expressed they felt like targets in their classrooms, constantly had to work to get others to see their point of views, and were in environments where there were not diverse perspectives. Rather, it was their perspective and that of their classmates. Critical Race Theory asserts these academic environments work to silence multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, White, upper-class cultures as the "standard" knowledge students need to know (Swartz, 1992). Thus, perspectives that did not reflect the dominant voice must be brought under control, mastered, and then reshaped to fit the cultural norms characterized by the English track (Swartz, 1992). The abovementioned factors that accompanied the African American male participants in their advanced track English classes were evidence of how these students had to battle the more subtle, but just as deeply entrenched, varieties of racism in their classes (Green, 1999).

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

In the late 1800s tracking arose to address the challenges and shortcomings of the education system in the United States (Oakes, 1995). Tracking formats were prescribed as an antidote to successfully meet the learning needs of students with diverse academic abilities (Oakes, 1985). Today the use of tracking is still widespread and continues to separate children by ability (Moore & Lewis, 2012). Supporters of tracking argue the format provides low-achieving students with the attention and slower pace they require and advanced students with the appropriate challenge needed to accelerate their learning (Powell, 2011). Further, supporters of tracking argue the format individualizes instruction as well as serves as a preventative measure to avoid-low achievers from hindering the progress of their advanced counterparts (Powell, 2011). Contrarily, opponents of tracking interpret the format as more of an educational detriment than advantage.

Opponents of tracking stress negative academic outcomes can be attributed to the descriptions of instruction, materials, teacher actions and expectations, and classroom interactions within the tracking format (Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser, & Hampton, 2009). It has also been expressed that the practice of placing students in homogenous groups is one educational practice that contributes most to the miseducation and underachievement of African American children (Irvine, 1991). As argued by tracking opponents, the format is designed in a way in which high achievers reap the greatest educational benefit (Green, 1999). In the scope of this research, the findings suggest that the tracking format

is problematic, particularly for the African American males that participated in this research. Although the findings support the literature in that advance track students receive higher teacher expectations, experience better classroom relationships, and receive instruction that is more rigorous than lower track students, there are deeper implications for the tracked system.

This chapter will serve to provide implications for the findings highlighted in chapter four. After a discussion of the research implications and their connection to the theoretical frameworks that guided the study, the chapter will conclude with recommendations and a plan for future research. Although the findings are not generalizable, I believe the implications of this research will be a springboard for future research on the topic of tracking.

Teacher Expectations

Although the findings captured what the literature expressed as low expectations for lower track students and high expectations for advance track students, an analysis of the data shed light on this idea of what it meant to be a good student within each track placement. In the eyes of the African American male participants, the data showed teacher expectations played a critical role in their student identity. The expectations communicated by their teachers created a vision of the successful student. As a result of this created vision, students bought into the expectations and conducted themselves in a way that reflected what they thought of as being a good, successful student. The findings were consistent with the literature. “If teacher treatment is consistent over time and if students do not actively resist it, the treatment will likely affect student self-concept, achievement motivation, level of aspiration, classroom conduct, and interactions with the

teacher" (Irvine, 1991). However, what is problematic is that participants' vision of a good, successful student differed across tracks based on teacher expectations.

Based on teacher expectations in the Standard track, a good student was attentive and completed assignments. However, in the advanced tracks, a good student was college ready. The college ready student was expected to write 10 page responses in MLA format, provide textual analysis in everything read, include citations to enhance credibility, and communicate effectively. It is important to understand what the African American males in this study interpreted as a good student based on teacher expectations matters and has implications for their futures. It is clear that the students functioned in alignment with their teachers' expectations. The actions and habits taken on by the Standard track students got them through their current English course and the actions and habits taken on by the advanced track students prepared them for higher education and life. The problem is that the students' idea of what a good student is has the power to transfer to other aspects of their lives. Meaning, habits developed through passive learning by Standard track students could potentially limit their development and opportunities for advancement in life. Contrarily, habits developed through active learning by advanced track students could potentially have a positive effect on their development and create unlimited opportunities for advancement in their lives. Research suggests, "Students assigned to lower tracks are disadvantaged in comparison to higher track students in their prospects for completing high school, attending college, and securing high-status jobs" (Green, 1999, p. 241). Ultimately, the expectations make a difference in student achievement and other outcomes, indicating that teacher expectations function as self-fulfilling prophecies.

Student-Peer Relationships

In regards to student-peer relationships, the issue of isolation deserves further attention. All of the participants in the study expressed a form of isolation. The descriptions of isolation experienced differed between standard and advanced tracks. Based on the data, academic isolation was experienced by the standard track participants and racial isolation was experienced by the Honors and Advance Placement track students. The academic isolation experienced by the Standard track students was a result of isolating activities embedded in the curriculum that hindered the building of relationships and learning to collaborate with peers. The isolation experienced in advanced tracks was a result of a racial imbalance. The African American male participants were the only students of color in their respective classes, and this created a social divide between them and their classmates. What should be pointed out in both instances of isolation is that the racial isolation of advanced track students was more apparent than the academic isolation experienced by Standard track students. I believe the racial isolation experienced was intentionally more apparent than the academic isolation for reasons I will discuss later in the chapter. What is more troubling about both instances of isolation is that the participants had no control over the factors that separated them from their peers.

Most of the advanced track students indicated that they were fully aware of the ways in which they differed from their peers. They knew that race stood at the forefront of their isolation and there was nothing they could do to change the dynamics of their classes. However, the racial isolation they experienced did not stop their ability to work well with their peers or prevent them from wanting to do well in their classes. However, a

desire for sameness did emerge from the data. The participants wanted peers that looked like them and shared the same cultural backgrounds. They were unhappy not being able to relate to their peers, feeling like they did not belong, feeling outnumbered, or that the classroom environment felt like 'us vs. them'. It is likely this dynamic contributed to the small percentage of African American males registered for the advanced track English courses. Research suggests variables that may impact the number of students of color in gifted education include a lack of other students of color, a lack of teacher support, and a lack of culturally appropriate teaching materials and strategies (Moore & Lewis, 2012). It seems that the racial isolation is more apparent to these students to send a message of who belongs in the advanced track courses. From a sociocultural perspective, this is evidence to show how identity is shaped by insider/outsider group status. Furthermore, if African American males see less and less of themselves in the advanced tracks, maybe it will deter them from signing up for the advanced track English courses. Critical Race Theory suggests that the limited access African American students have to advance track courses is intentional to sustain educational inequities (Bell, 1995; Kozol, 1991). Sadly, the intellectual abilities of the advance track participants indicated that they belonged in their respective classes, but the racial orientation of their classrooms said otherwise. The data suggest that schools should work toward creating advanced track classrooms that are racially balanced so that African American male students are more inclined to take these classes as well as feel welcomed in the advanced setting.

The academic isolation experienced by standard track participants was less apparent than the racial isolation of their advanced track peers. These students were in a classroom setting that was diverse. They could look around their classroom and see

others like themselves as well as students from other racial backgrounds. However, the format of instruction isolated these students from their peers. The participants described course assignments that were rooted in independent work. There were fewer opportunities to collaborate with peers because tasks consisted of independent writing, reading, and the completing of worksheets. It seems that the isolation experienced in the standard track was not apparent to students because it was aligned with the culture of a standard track English course, students fulfilling tasks set forth by their instructor independently. From the perspective of Critical Race theory, the isolated nature of the Standard track was a reflection of how instructional strategies implemented by teachers presume African American students to be deficient, removing any instructional accountability from the teacher (Ladson-Billings, 1999). The data suggest that in order to change the culture we must rethink how students are taught. This means educating students in the realm of 21st century skills and finding ways to keep them involved in the learning process. Ultimately, to better academically prepare these students and to eliminate a culture of academic isolation, educators most move their students from this passive way of learning to an active approach.

Academic Experience

The findings from the African American male participants illuminated a contrast between the ways in which each track participated in the learning experience. The data showed depending on the track placement, students experienced instruction that fostered either passive or active learning. Specifically, the data highlighted as English tracks became more advanced, students moved from a passive style of learning to a more active approach as demonstrated in the Honors and Advanced Placement English tracks. Passive

learning was the dominant form of instruction in the Standard English track. As Leonard (2002, p. 147) states, "The standard teaching method for passive learning is the traditional lecture, whereby the students are, in effect, bench-bound listeners, passively consuming the content presented by the instructor according to the structure that he or she created." The Standard track students took notes, memorized vocabulary, completed worksheets, and read novels without constructing meaning. This type of academic experience was problematic because the students were unable to construct knowledge and create meaning on their own. Rather, they were confined to the knowledge given to them by their teacher.

Contrarily, active learning was representative of the Honors and Advance Placement English tracks. "Active learning emphasizes the intrinsic motivation and self-sponsored curiosity of the learner who fashions content and is actively involved in its formation" (Leonard, 2002, p.3). The participants in these advanced tracks read from a critical lens and wrote responses in which they synthesized and analyzed the content of a given text. They also engaged in Socratic seminars, collaborative projects, and debates. The data suggest these students were more prepared to flourish in any type of academic setting given the skills they obtained from their active learning environments than the Standard track students. It should be understood that the active learning classroom inspires involvement and, in the process, ignites the potential students carry (Harmin, 1994). The abovementioned assertion implies that the passive learning environment stalls student potential and does not allow students to become invested in the learning process. If the Standard track was characterized by passive learning, as it was, it means the

African American male participants within that track were not afforded the appropriate avenues of learning to support their academic growth.

A closer examination of the findings showed that the types of learning students experienced moved from isolation to collaborative. Participants in the Standard track described an isolated academic experience that was characterized by independent note taking, worksheet completion, vocabulary memorization, and reading. The abovementioned academic experience differed from the advanced tracks that took part in a variety of collaborative activities such as Socratic seminars, debates, and collaborative projects. Many learning theories including sociocultural theory and constructivist theory suggest that active learning provides more meaningful experiences for students. Further, this concept includes all of the knowledge and skills that an individual cannot yet understand or perform, but is capable of learning with guidance. If we know that academic development occurs outside of isolation, then it is apparent that the style of learning embedded in the Standard Track English I class inhibited the academic growth of its students. The independent nature of the class only allowed students, in most cases, to function at their actual developmental level, a level that was brought with them as they entered the classroom. In contrast, the advanced track English courses ignited the students' potential by allowing knowledge the students already possessed to mature. The participants were able to develop their thinking past their actual developmental level through the collaborative activities their classes required.

Recommendations

This study has highlighted the voices of eight African American males in differently tracked English courses. Their voices have highlighted factors that have

hindered or fostered academic achievement within their respective English tracks. Because their voices were instrumental in better understanding the learning experiences of the different English tracks, I believe, on a larger scale, capturing student perspectives of the learning experience could be monumental in creating change within schools. In efforts to better serve students, particularly those who have been marginalized, schools should establish an evaluation system to get student feedback about their courses. In a sense, this would work like a course evaluation at the collegiate level. However, this evaluation would take place two times during the course semester, mid-semester and at the end of the semester. A mid-semester evaluation would allow teachers to make changes to the current course to better serve their diverse population. An end of the year evaluation would prompt teachers and administrators to rethink course design and how teachers should engage students in course material. Ultimately, the evaluation system would work to allow student voices to be heard while making continuous changes to courses to better accommodate all learners. The evaluations should by analyzed and discussed by administrators, facilitators, and teachers. This would minimize bias and provide a variety of perspectives to improve the learning experience.

Schools should also work to minimize the kind of isolation experienced by the participants in this study. In efforts to minimize student isolation and improve the academic experience, schools should implement the middle school concept of teaming. "This partnership of shared time, space, instructional and curricular emphases, and philosophy can make a large school feel smaller and reduce anonymity for young adolescents and adults alike" (Powell, 2011, p.145). Within the team concept, a group of teachers assume responsibility for the facilitation of academic and social growth of a

specific group of students (Powell, 2011). The composition of students on a team should be reflective of the school population, encompassing students that reflect a variety of ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, and academic achievement. This would eliminate the racial isolation the advanced track students experienced and the distant relationships Standard track students experienced because of course scheduling. Also, students would benefit from teaming because teachers would get to know them well, the learning environment would become more personalized, a sense of belonging would be created, and support from teachers would be comprehensive (Powell, 2011). The academic experience would improve because within the team concept academic decisions are made collaboratively between teachers, instructional strategies are shared, and curriculum integration is implemented (Powell, 2011). The collaborative efforts of the teamed teachers should ignite intellectual stimulation and produce instruction that moves students from passive to active learning. The teaming approach should, overall, improve the classroom experiences of the African American males included in this research through higher expectations, better peer relationships, and an academic experience that is characterized by active learning. In this format, however, teachers should receive professional development in the areas of diversity and differentiation to better understand diverse populations as well as how to teach students of differing academic abilities.

Future Research

Based on the data and recommendations, future research would entail a few things. I think the effectiveness of a course evaluation system should be explored to determine if it is an effective tool to improve the learning experiences of students, particularly African American males. It is my belief that effective change can only occur

if the problems that exist are identified. Teachers can only improve the experiences of their students if they can pinpoint what hinders learning. I would interview students to determine if positive changes were made as a result of their evaluation responses and teachers would be interviewed to determine if student responses were clear and sufficient enough to create change within their classrooms.

I think the implementation of the middle school Teaming concept should be explored at the high school level to improve the social and academic development of African American male students. A future research study could entail the implementation of the Teaming format and the interviewing of African American male students to describe their classroom experiences in the context of teacher expectations, student-peer relationships, and the academic experience. It would be interesting to see if the students shared experiences that were representative of high expectations, positive student relationships, and an academic experience that was characterized by active learning as a result of deviating from the tracked format.

Future research would also consist of interviewing principals and counselors. I would interview principals to better understand why students in different tracks received specialized instruction in which advance tracks were offered a curriculum that was more rigorous and focused on active learning. I would also want to understand how curriculum expectations were developed and conveyed to teachers of different English tracks. I believe that changing expectations for teachers would change the learning experiences for students. Counselors would be interviewed to understand how students were registered for specific tracks. I would also inquire about parental knowledge of track quality, what types of students were encouraged to register for particular tracks, and what would be the

best plan of action to evenly distribute the racial backgrounds that make up the school population into advance English tracks. The future research mentioned would be a step closer to understanding the landscape of education that marginalizes students of color. As a result, researchers and practitioners would be better equipped to build momentum in the movement to provide all students with an equitable education.

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