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Self-Perceptions Of Black Teens In AP English Literature Courses And How Muted  
Group Theory Can Help Us Understand How To Teach Them Better

**Purpose**

Recent data from College Board reported that of all racial groups, Black students are the most underrepresented among AP examinees (Ford & Whiting, 2009). The purpose of this study is to get a deeper understanding of the gaps in educating Black high school teens in advanced placement courses. By incorporating muted group theory, the study takes a new understanding from a communication lens. Understanding first how Black teens are a muted group can then help to teach educators about how to communicate with this population and help them achieve success in their courses. Understanding how Black teens see themselves in these courses will help to revitalize AP courses so that students of color have a better chance of doing well in them. By understanding this population better, society can begin to work towards how to better assist this population in achieving higher grades, maintaining a high grade point average, and helping them see academic success as a positive influence on their life. Focusing on bettering the experience of the Black students in schools, will in turn better the experience for all students.

**Literature Review**

**Experience for Black teens in AP courses**

In 1995, the Minority Scholars program was created at Central High School in Omaha, Nebraska to increase the number of minority students in AP courses. While the

school had a 25% population of minority students, in 1995, only 5 of the 120 minority students were enrolled in an AP course. In order to help understand the problem, a steering committee of minority students with GPAs higher than a 3.2 on a 4.0 scale was formed to identify the issues the minority students faced. The students reported that they faced pressure from both those in and outside their culture. They (1) feared being called “sell outs” by their classmates and feared being ostracized because their classmates believe they are giving up their own culture to assimilate to the main culture; (2) feel a sense of alienation and isolation because they do not tend to make friends in AP classes and stick to themselves; (3) have no support from both the school and their home to enroll in an AP course; (4) their ACT and SAT scores did not compare to their White classmates even though their GPAs were just as high; and (5) those minority students who already were deemed “academically successful” were overlooked to be enrolled in an AP course. (Saunders & Maloney, 2005) These issues were identified to be a hindrance to students’ success in 1995, and unfortunately not much have changed. In terms of the research in advanced placement courses (AP), recent data shows the continued disparity of Black students enrolled and achieving in these classes.

In 2009, a study was conducted that showed quantitatively the significant differences amongst Black students and other races in terms of the AP tests and courses. First, of all racial groups, Black students are the most underrepresented among AP examinees (Ford & Whiting, 2009). This was found after examining data released in 2007 from College Board about participation in AP classes by race. Another finding from this data was that there was an increase in 2006 in equity and excellence gaps for Black students. Finally, when looking at overall participation in the 37 AP classes offered

nationally, the lowest participation rate amongst African-Americans was 1.7% and the “highest” rate was 9.7%. The lowest participation rates were in English classes like English Language and Composition and English Literature and Composition. They concluded that key barriers like teacher underreferral, lower test performance, and lower grades/GPAs in courses, were continuing to cause significantly lower participation rates in AP courses for Black students. In 2018, Jennifer Roberts did a study on how society can try to close the enrollment gap between traditionally underrepresented students and their peers in advanced placement courses. College Board reported in 2013 that Black students represented only 7.4% of the total number of students who took an AP exam. In comparison to their White classmates, who represented 55.9% of students who took an AP exam, Black students are still the lowest demographic to participate in AP exams. Furthermore, there was minimal to no growth in score increases amongst Black and Hispanic students since 2003. In ten years, little to nothing had changed in terms of score increases for entire groups of students. These findings draw into question why and how these students are continuing to do poorly on these exams despite the significance of a ten-year time difference. They argued that underrepresented students have lower levels of participation in AP courses because often times, a variety of AP courses is not made available or no courses are available at all, these students can not or are not participants in extracurricular activities so they are less likely to hear about the courses or regard them as important, and their overall connectedness to their school. Significantly, it was added that school administrators do not understand the severity of the cultural implications like decreased student performance that come from this disparity in enrollment. They furthered that schools must actively search for ways to engage and motivate this

population to take advanced placement courses. These studies prove that Black students are continuously underrepresented and underserved in terms of advanced placement courses and that methods should be taken by school administrators to decrease this gap. Scholars have since recommended that the public start to examine the effect that the lack of Black teachers throughout P-16 education has on the students. In 2014, it was discussed that the world traditionally envisioned students being taught by a white male teacher, and little had been done to change that narrative. Jackson, Hendrix, and Warren expressed hope that the issues raised would “motivate educators to systematically and programmatically investigate the changing-student and teacher- faces and life experiences that now gather together in the same classroom setting”. They concluded that it is a detriment to multicultural students’ academic success to consistently not feel represented by those who teach them and that has a negative effect on the students’ willingness to learn. Finally, in 2016 a study was conducted as a response to “We Were There Too: Learning from Black Male Teachers in Mississippi about Successful Teaching of Black Students.” Jackson, Green, Martin, & Fasching-Varner, suggested that teachers who teach Black students must know that 1) Racism functions on many levels and must teach students of color to free themselves from the idea that change will occur while also understanding they will need to continue to try and change the way the world functions and 2) Scholars must continue to mentor, educate, and teach Black students how to navigate a world where race affects their day-to-day life. They furthered that until teachers start to teach from this perspective, Black students will continue to perform negatively in school.

Another aspect of the students' experiences is the extent to which their experiences and standpoints are expressed (or expressible) in the classroom context. Muted group theory addresses this issue by allowing those expressions to be examined within a current framework. With English AP classes having the lowest participation rates from Black students across the nation, it leaves the question of what those who are enrolled in these courses experience? Muted Group Theory was coined in the 70s as first a feminist theory. It later became known as a communication theory after the audience of the original theory was expanded from women, to any subordinate group. Muted Group Theory explains how people who are assigned or attached (either by society or by themselves) to a subordinate group often have an entirely different view point of the world, but rarely are offered the opportunity to voice such views. They refrain from doing so in fear of negative consequences and because most members of subordinate groups have little to no power in most situations. (Kramarae, 2005) The "mutedness" that comes from having no power is what I hypothesize Black students to be experiencing when it comes to enrollment in AP courses. Shirley Ardener, one of the scholars who created the theory, further explains the implications on the subordinate group who are actively muted. "Muting, by dominant groups through control of dominant discourse, is refracted through and embedded in many different social spaces: seating arrangements, prestige and power, religion and speech" (Ardener, 2005). Not only are Black students represented minimally, but there are so many barriers for them to not only enroll but succeed in AP courses that they in turn are being muted. The "dominant group" in this case is College Board, the administrators and creators of the policies and curriculum associated with the AP test, but also the faculty who is instructed to teach it and those

who enable faculty to teach these courses. I hope that by analyzing the data using this context, that I can understand the issue holistically.

### **Self-image of teens**

While it is important to understand the entire experience that Black students face while in AP courses, it is equally important to understand what it is they are being taught, and whether or not that also affects their success. As stated under *Experience for Black teens in AP courses*, Black students face many different obstacles in the classroom as a whole, as well as in the world of AP courses. They face both social and academic barriers that prevent them from succeeding in these courses. However, I would like to know if their curriculum also represents yet another hurdle to get through once enrolled in an advanced placement course. In 2006, a study was done in Seaford School District to combat the issue of the percentage of Black student attendance in public high schools failing to match the percentage of Black students in AP courses in those same schools. VanSciver, (2006) concluded that lower income students are more likely to fail advanced placement courses and that Seaford School District needed to develop ways to retain the students in the courses and develop ways that they can succeed in them. These measures included individual meetings, and incentives like dances and award ceremonies when they achieve. Adding these tactics helped to increase the rate of participation as well as decrease the percentage of Black students failing these courses. While it was concluded that these students needed intervention in order to succeed, the specifics of what in the curriculum these students interpreted differently was not revealed. This gap is where I plan to do my research.

## **Gaps in Research**

The biggest gap lies in the research of AP curriculum. Any research in AP curriculum is needed. I specifically would like to question what, if anything, is in the curriculum of AP English courses that also adds to the high rates of failure amongst Black students. I also want to question how specifically this curriculum effects the self-perception of Black students when it comes to their writing and self-confidence. Both of these areas are minimally researched in 2018.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) How do Black teens experience AP English Literature courses?
- 2) What are the effects of AP English texts, assignments, and exams on Black teens' perception/evaluation of their own writing?

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

The participants for this study are Black high school students enrolled in AP Literature course(s). These students will be chosen based on how they identify their racial and ethnic identities (If they identify as Black, (African, African-American, Afro-Latinx)), their willingness to participate, and if they are enrolled in an Advanced Placement English Literature or Language course. In order to have a reasonably sized sample, 10 students will be interviewed and 100 students will be given a survey. problem is to truly be eradicated then all dimensions of the issue must be addressed.

After transcription, the interviews will be analyzed using Grounded Theory. According to Glaser and Strauss (1969), this method includes simultaneous data collection and analysis. It is inductive and iterative, and includes a process of looking for relationships within data, while remaining open to all possibilities. The findings may then be conceptualized into themes such as but not limited to causes, consequences, continuums, hierarchies, contexts, and covariances (Barnes & de Hoyos, 2012) that emphasize the common experiences of these students.

### *Qualitative*

It is imperative to the findings of this study to capture the students' personal experiences in real-time and have the stories obtain rich, detailed information. In order to receive these results, interviews will be necessary. These interviews will be used for the purpose of action research. Action research is a qualitative method that results in social change. Action research aims to provide information that will empower the members of the group to create change as a direct result of the research. These interviews will reveal a holistic view of the classroom experience, teacher-student relationship, and the relationship to the texts, assignments, and supplemental information the students receive in their course. By revealing these experiences, the students, the faculty, and those who create the curriculum, College Board, can get a rich view of the issues that afflict Black students specifically in AP Literature courses. Putting these issues at the forefront will highlight the prevalence of negative experiences for Black students and will hopefully push those with influence in the education system to think of reform.



The interview questions will be a mix of direct, indirect, structuring, follow-up, probing, specifying, and interpreting questions. The interview will begin with a warm-up question because it builds rapport between the interviewer and the respondents. Then, I want to ensure the interview continues to tackle topics in a logical flow. The questions will investigate the experiences the students have with their daily classroom activities and norms, their assigned readings, and how the overall experience of the course makes them feel. The goal is to have a diverse set of answers to try and capture the array of experiences Black students experience in these classes. If the problem is to truly be eradicated then all dimensions of the issue must be addressed. (“See Appendix A”)

### *Quantitative*

In order to determine whether this is happening to a majority of students, the study will include a numerical data portion. The students will each receive a survey that will ask them about their self-perception in different areas on a likert scale. Likert scales allow a more precise answer rather than a “yes/no” answer and make the results easy to compile.. These questions are meant to gage how receptive students are to the teaching style, the classroom experience, and the texts involved in the curriculum. Matching the students’ spoken issues in the interviews with numerical data will help to compare the problems numerically that afflict this population on a day-to-day basis.

I will use SurveyMonkey, a site that creates surveys online. Following the article *Analyzing The Results From An Online Questionnaire*, written by the UCLA Institute for Digital Research and Education, I will then generate descriptive statistics using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I hope to investigate the experiences that Black students have in AP English courses. I question whether the low number of Black students in English AP courses has anything to do with their experience in class or the materials that come from their class. I hope to see a connection between students' experiences and their perceptions of themselves as students as writers. This study aims to bring awareness to the difference in experiences that Black students have in English AP courses and answer why there is such a huge disparity of Black students in this area.

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Hendrix, K. G., & Wilson, C. (2014). Virtual Invisibility: Race and Communication Education. *Communication Education*, 63(4), 405-428.  
doi:10.1080/03634523.2014.934852 (A thorough analysis of the literature in CE reveals that—at best—we view students being taught by a gender/raceless professor but more than likely, a white male. A review of the past decade reveals we have failed to progress in this area; instead, we continue to fold back on ourselves, yielding maladjusted research that does not reflect the nuances of a changing society or classroom demographic. In the 2003 special issue of CE exploring coidentities in the classroom, Jackson, Hendrix, and Warren expressed hope that the issues raised would “motivate educators to systematically and programmatically investigate the changing-student and teacher- faces and life experiences that now gather together in the same classroom setting”)

Jackson, M., Green, D., Martin, L. L., & Fasching-Varner, K. J. (2016). Band-Aids Don't Fix Bullet Holes. A Response to “We Were There Too: Learning from Black Male Teachers in Mississippi about Successful Teaching of Black Students.” *Democracy & Education*, 24(2). (Teachers who teach Black students must know that 1) Racism functions on many levels and must teach students of color to free themselves from the idea that change will occur while also understanding they will need to continue to try and

change the way the world functions and 2) Scholars continue to mentor, educate, and teach Black students how to navigate a world where race affects their day-to-day life.)

Kramarae, C. (2005). Muted Group Theory and Communication: Asking Dangerous Questions. *Women & Language*, 28(2), 55-61. (Muted group theory was used to bring the problems of vulnerable groups to the forefront and make them more understandable. However, theories are often considered law in academia and it is imperative that scholars take a second look. Muted group theory does explicitly define the difference between silence and mutedness. It also does not take into account any silences that come into the dynamic.)

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doi:10.1207/s15327892mcp0803\_10 (The population of diverse students in advanced

placement courses does not reflect the growing diverse population of high schools. Lower income students are more likely to fail advanced placement courses so Seaford School District developed ways to retain them. These measures included individual meetings, and incentives like dances and award ceremonies when they achieve greatness.)

## Interview Questions

- 1) What grade are you in?
- 2) How did you come about signing up for the course?
- 3) How likely are you to recommend this course to someone of the same ethnic background as you?
  - a. Why?
- 4) What do you usually do on a day-to-day basis in class?
- 5) What has been your favorite part of this course?
  - a. Why?
  - b. Favorite book/assignment?
- 6) Tell me about your teacher and your interactions with them.
  - a. How comfortable do you feel around your teacher?
  - b. How well does your teacher relate to you?
  - c. Race, culture and communication style
  - d. How do you think your teacher sees you?
- 7) “How do you see yourself in class?”
  - a. In comparison to your peers?
- 8) Is there any part of your experience in this course that you would like to share?

## Survey Questions

I enjoy my experience in AP English (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

I enjoy the books I read in AP English (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

I enjoy the assignments in my AP English course (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

I feel open to share my ideas with my class. (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

I feel when I express my point of view, I am understood by my teacher and my peers. (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

I feel when I express my point of view, “” respected (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

I feel my teacher can relate to me. (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

The books we read in class are books I would enjoy reading outside of class. (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

How likely are you to recommend this course to someone else? (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)

How likely are you to recommend this course to one of your peers with your same racial/ethnic background? (1-strongly agree; 5-strongly disagree)