

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT ACADEMIC
(DIS)ENGAGEMENT:
A MANIFESTATION OF WHITE FRAGILITY
IN THE CLASSROOM

By

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned **Israel Aiesha Collier** hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language.

This is a true copy of the thesis, including final revisions.

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Abstract

Although the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has been authorized several times since 1950, the United States (U.S.) does not have an education policy that exercises racial equality for many Black¹ students. Education equity is a current topic of contested debate. Institutionalized racism widens the achievement gap between Black and White American students. Using Critical Race Methodology, the first question of the study's qualitative research seeks to garner a better understanding of the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards "White Fragility", a form of implicit bias. The second research question explores the effects of "White Fragility" on African American student learning. The underlying theory is that the *Pygmalion Effect* creates a vehicle for a manifestation of "White Fragility": African American student academic (dis)engagement. This relationship is not well-articulated in the literature. The case study gathered in-depth qualitative data from three high schools in three cities, including: Imperial, Missouri, St. Paul, Minnesota and Jacksonville, North Carolina for the purpose of closing the Black-White achievement gap in a country where education is not equal for all. Interviews were conducted with students, teachers, professors and a former administrator. The results correlate "White Fragility" with "barriers" and/or "barriers" with "disengagement", designating "White Fragility" as a plausible impediment to African American student learning and more specifically, Black progress in advanced coursework. The thesis concludes by providing recommendations for future research and practical implications for policy stakeholders.

¹ For the purposes of this thesis, "Black" is used interchangeably with "African American" and includes humans who identify with being African or African-American.

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List of Abbreviations

AA – African American

AP – Advanced Placement

CIS – College in the Schools

HU – Hermeneutic Unit

IB – International Baccalaureate

MN – Minnesota

MO – Missouri

NC – North Carolina

SPED – Special Education

U.S. – United States

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The United States (U.S.) has excluded African Americans (AA) from the freedoms of education since they arrived on slave ships in 1619. Reading and writing were illegal and greatly decreased access to intellectual development and human empowerment for Africans. These inequities reduced the slave to manual labor for the fulfillment of capitalism in the U.S. There is ongoing evidence that although the U.S. has made progress since *Brown vs. Board of Education* in the 1950's (an historic landmark case that desegregated public schools), passing legislation to further reduce education disparities in the 60's and 70's, Black students continue to fall behind White students academically.²

1.1. Statement of the Problem

There is a crisis in AA Education. Research shows a persistent student academic achievement gap between Black and White student (Vanneman et al., 2009), resulting in economically disadvantaged Black communities (Atkinson 2010).

1.2. Evidence of the Achievement Gap

By definition, an achievement gap is a significant discrepancy in academic performance between groups of individuals. As of 2017, data revealed that there is still an achievement gap between Black and White students ranging from 0.6-0.8 standard deviations representing a 1-1.5 year distinction between peers (National Assessment of Educational Progress n.d.). Black students continue to score below White students (Olneck 2005; Monk 2001; Jencks and Phillips 1998). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Assessment

² (Young, J.V., and Laster, n.d.)

of Educational Progress n.d.), average Mathematics scores (4th and 8th grades) for Black and White students have trended upwards. Still, the data shows a 23-point academic achievement gap between White and Black students at the fourth grade level and a 26-point difference between White and Black eighth grade students in 2004 (National Assessment of Educational Progress n.d.).

Although Black students are graduating high school at a higher rate (24% in 1950 and 86% in 2005), (Snyder 1993) according to Balfanz and Legters, (Balfanz and Legters 2004) 46% or more of high school students do not graduate. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education reported a graduation rate for Whites at 85% whereas AA graduated at a rate of 68% in the 2011-2012 academic school year (Kena, Musu-Gillette, and Robinson n.d.). The Black-White achievement gap persists today due to the continuation of institutionalized bias and passive oppression mired in racialized education policy.

1.3. Education Inequity in the United States

Education policies are leaving Black parents without a choice. In the past ten years alone, sixteen St. Louis public schools have failed to fulfill state standards and have since closed their doors.³ Vacant buildings force parents to choose either to enroll their children in overcrowded public schools (where resources are limited) or privatized public charter schools (where poor parents are provided partial vouchers to pay for enrollment) (Singer 2019). Parents are also compelled to consider sending their children outside of the district where they reside. However, according to MO legislature, public schools from which students are transferred outside of their residential district are required to pay the host district for visiting students,

³ 2017. "The Sad Story of Public Education in St. Louis." *Washington Post*, September 17. Accessed November 17, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/09/07/the-sad-story-of-public-education-in-st-louis/?utm_term=.e7f00e4ab751

which decreases the amount of funding available for the remaining overcrowded, understaffed, ill-equipped public schools. Because public schools do not meet the States' core standards, Black parents do not have sustainable options to provide adequate education for their children.

Public school systems need education reform which will require a race discourse that specifically speaks to the White teacher-Black student interaction in classroom settings. The researcher hypothesizes that Black students become disengaged in classrooms where White teachers are unable to connect, resulting in discomfort, discouragement, isolation and eventual withdrawal from advanced courses. The encouragement to enroll in AP courses (particularly in Math and Science), is not as accessible to Black students and equips them with less hiring potential in these respective fields later in their careers. Education policies are colorblind⁴ and do not embody a significant amount of cultural discourse that considers the disconnect between White teachers and their Black students.

In an effort to close the Black-White student achievement gap, this research will evaluate how “White Fragility” is perceived by White female teachers in classroom settings. To expand on this, the researcher will investigate to what degree “White Fragility” affects AA student learning, a dynamic of which there is little to no coverage in the literature.

1.4. History of U.S. Education Policy

1.4.1. Federal Policies

Many federal policies have been implemented for the purpose of closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. The ESEA has been reauthorized eight times and not unlike

⁴ Colorblind refers to an idea that education is race neutral. Race neutrality fails to observe cultural nuances specifically as it pertains to Black students.

the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it is reauthorized because the U.S. has failed to adopt education policies for sustainable classroom environments that are equal to every student. Each authorization considers curriculum, resources, human capital and professional development but there is still concern for reading competency (Kauerz 2002) as well as Math and Science proficiency in AA students. Although these reauthorizations have garnered more government expenditures, the achievement gap between White and Black students remains. Black students continue to fall behind.

Common Core State Standards, a modern version of ESEA, was implemented in 2009 and adopted a set of achievement benchmarks (or predetermined standards) that rewarded states capable of reaching those predetermined standards. More specifically, successful completion of standardized tests would determine which schools fulfilled predetermined standards. Only certain States would benefit from government funds allotted for meeting the State's standards.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, passed in 2015), attempted to decentralize education. Implementation in all 50 States commenced in 2018. The Act continued a standardized testing requirement and was an effort to allot more sovereignty to each State provided they implement annual plans according to federal, State and/or local education policy guidelines. Students are tested in Math and Language Arts, once per year in grades 3-8 and again in grades 9-12. Additionally, students must be assessed in Science at least once in the 3rd - 5th grades, once in the 6th – 9th grades and once in grades 10-12 ("Every Student Succeeds Act," n.d.).

It should be noted that federalism in the U.S. Constitution separates powers, permitting States to create and implement education policy specific to their State. However, federal guidelines do not lead with a race discourse needed for equitable education reform nationwide.

1.4.2. State Policies

This thesis collected qualitative data from classrooms in the State of Missouri (MO), Minnesota (MN) and North Carolina (NC). States were chosen for this research because according to 2016 Census data, MO, MN and NC are nationally ranked 12, 22 and 40 respectively in terms of the achievement gap by race (*U.S. News*, n.d.). Additionally, both MO and MN were geographically accessible for vis-à-vis⁵ interviews.

1.4.2.1. Missouri

One of eight States, MO had an anti-literacy statute instituted in 1847, prohibiting the education of slaves (Dominguez 2016). But MO is historically renowned for its overt racist policies ranging from its prolonging of slavery, gerrymandering rules to racial profiling. Its education policies are not far behind in terms of benefitting the wealthy and disenfranchising the poor. The State of MO is unique in that the State is divided into 90 municipalities and includes 567 school districts making an already historically challenging area in policy that much more difficult. Although a regional comparison reported MO with a 14:1 teacher-to-student ratio (compared to neighboring States Arkansas, Illinois and Iowa) (“National Center for Education Statistics,” n.d.) between 2012-2013, MO shows very little progress in terms of performance improvement (*Washington Post* 2017).

MO is renowned for its unequal student disciplining and discriminatory suspension policies. Data shows that MO public schools disproportionately track Black student behavior, increasing the likelihood of AA school suspensions (Collier 2019c). In 2015, the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the University of California-Los Angeles ranked MO number one in the country for suspending Black elementary students. Given that high school teachers are already under

⁵ Vis-à-vis is a French phrase that translates to *face-to-face*, used here to describe in-person interviews.

duress, individual biases towards Black students exacerbates the teacher-student dynamic. Institutionalized racism can come in many forms and if teachers feel “threatened”, “disrespected” or “challenged” by Black students, teachers and administrators have the authority to suspend the student in the State of MO.

1.4.2.2. Minnesota and North Carolina face Similar Issues

Although the 2010 Census reported 79% as being non-Hispanic White and 8.4% non-Hispanic Black, both races having a predominantly Black presence reportedly do fair as well economically (Burnside, n.d.). But segregation plays a significant factor in lower rates of upward income mobility as compared to other neighborhoods. Today, MN’s Black population has increased and so has segregation in terms of housing, employment and education.⁶ Moreover, according to WalletHub, MN is ranked the worst State for financial equality (Burnside, n.d.). And in a State with affordable housing, decent employment and a low cost of living. What distinguishes MN from MO is its policy on alternatives to suspension. MN implements the restorative practice approach in its effort encourage positive behavior, improve communication and maintain student retention. In lieu of being suspended or expelled, situations are deescalated, incorporating family participation and maintaining the student’s engagement. Still, MN is unable to avoid an academic achievement gap. In 2015 and 2017, The State of MN had one of the largest gaps in the Black-White achievement gap (Kamal 2016; Magan 2017).

A recent study, *The Geography of Racial/Ethnic Test Score Gap: CEPA Working Paper 16-10* identified two North Carolinian districts as having the highest achievement gaps (between

⁶ Johnson, Ben. 2015. "Minnesota Has the Worst Financial Racial Inequality in America, According to Study." *City Pages*, February 4. Accessed June 4, 2019. <http://www.citypages.com/news/minnesota-has-the-worst-financial-racial-inequality-in-america-according-to-study-6565353>

Black and White students) in the U.S. Although armed with qualified, certified teachers, the two districts both face high turnover rates (Scarbrough 2019). NC (in comparison to MO), also has a comprehensive policy for alternatives to suspension, that addresses teacher professional development, prohibits absences to be counted towards suspensions and includes language permitting students access to the same learning tools as if they were in class during the suspension (Scarbrough 2019).

Current Education policies at the Federal and State level are not working as evidenced by the Black-White achievement gap. Although these legislative measures appear to reduce education inequity and long-term economic inequality, neither of the policies consider the impact of “White Fragility” on student learning. Policies do not specifically underscore the psychosocial causes and effects of persistent achievement gaps between White and Black students. Current research ⁷ provides adequate support for the benefits of analyzing these psychosocial applications further. However, impact evaluation and cost-benefit analysis has failed to report the benefits of education reform (Belfield, Bowden, and Rodriguez 2018).

Educational outcome(s) in the U.S. are heavily rooted in its history of racism. AA students in particular, face education inequities in a plethora of ways. In an effort to assist policy makers in education reform, this thesis aims to accomplish four goals: (1) explore the teacher-student debate, (2) challenge antiquated education policies that fail to consider what causes AA (dis)engagement, (3) analyze a series of qualitative data and classroom observations and (4) discuss possible solutions for this ongoing crisis.

⁷ Dee, Thomas S. 2005. "A Teacher Like Me. Does Race, Ethnicity or Gender Matter?" *The American Economic Review* 95:158–65.

1.5. Defining “White Fragility”

Before we proceed to explore the intersectionality of race and teacher-student interactions in the literature, this final section will end by defining “White Fragility”. *White Fragility* is a reasonably new term coined by the lecturer and author Robin Di’Angelo (Di’Angelo 2018). *White fragility* is a response that occurs when White people are unwilling to absorb the impacts of racism on the oppressed race. Instead of accepting the reality of the oppressed race, White people typically respond with disbelief, denial and/or anger, among other reactions. *White Fragility* allows White people to remain free of the guilt often possessed once racism and oppression is acknowledged. In this way, White people are permitted to remain in their “safe place” as part of the dominant race, benefitting from the passive oppression of Black people. Our research shows that the term *White Fragility* (if known), has Black and White perspectives. But in general, the term is defined similarly. In all, *White Fragility* is a “barrier” that once created, impedes student connection (Collier 2019a) . If one is unable to acknowledge racial oppression openly and honestly, oppression is further perpetuated⁸ by creating unspoken barriers that threaten student identity and worth.⁹ Biased teaching practices and attitudes restrict AA student learning. Unfortunately, the manifestations of *White Fragility* are historically entrenched within U.S. Education policy measures and legal implementations. The thesis will now gather insights from prior research to lay the foundation of its conceptual framework: that the *Pygmalion Effect* is a vehicle for *White Fragility*.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Verkuyten, Maykel and Jochem Thijs. 2019. "Discrimination and Academic (Dis)Engagement of Ethnic-Racial Minority Students: A Social Identity Threat Perspective." *Social Psychology of Education*. 22:267-290.

Chapter 2 – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Chapter Overview

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on (1) why teacher characteristics matter (2) teacher-student interactions and (3) the negative impacts of teacher expectations and resulting student (dis)engagement. The next section will define *racial discrimination*, the *Pygmalion Effect* and *implicit bias* to better understand their individual significance and interacting roles which help to construct the thesis conceptual framework.

2.2 Definition of Terms

2.2.1. Racial Discrimination

Previous research has uncovered discrimination as a threat to the psychological mechanisms associated with academic (dis)engagement (Verkuyten, n.d.) . However, there is no evidence that pinpoints precisely where psychological mismanagement and (dis)engagement are juxtaposition-ed (Verkuyten and Thijs 2019). Verkuyten et al. attempt to describe the psychological dynamics of a number of variables that may contribute to psychosocial mismanagement. Basing their discussion on the Identity Process Theory by Breakwell and Vignoles, Verkuyten et al. explore characteristics such as that of the classroom and/or other social groups which can threaten one's social identity, increasing the likelihood of academically disengaging responses be they cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral (Verkuyten and Thijs 2019). Fredricks et al. further point out that emotional (dis)engagement could be factored into one's interest, linking discrimination to academic (dis)engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004).

2.2.2. Pygmalion Effect Shaped by Implicit Bias

Implicit Bias is a natural unconscious response to an event. Responses are comprised of cognitive functions or knee-jerk reactions based on previous knowledge and or perceptions of an outcome. The *Pygmalion Effect* is too an implicit bias whereby perceptions of how humans are perceived by others is then internalized, resulting in behavior that resembles that of others' attitudes and actions towards humans based on their beliefs. For example, if Teacher A has high expectations for Student A, Student A will directly reflect Teacher A's high expectations. Likewise, if Teacher A has low expectations for Student B, Student B will directly reflect Teacher A's low expectations. Peterson et al. describe biased stereotyping as repeated exposure to pairings of a social group or object with a particular characteristic (Peterson et al. 2016). Implicit bias has positive and negative forms. Both forms are seen in teacher expectations. However, for the purpose of this study, the aim is to determine to what degree *White Fragility* via the *Pygmalion Effect* plays a role on African American student academic (dis)engagement.

2.2.3. African American Student Academic (Dis)engagement: A Manifestation of White Fragility in the Classroom

At present there is no suitable method to capture White Fragility in the classroom as these findings are generally addressed inwardly. For example, when a Black student approaches a counselor about an advanced course of which they seek interest, semi-structured interviews could reveal the trickling Pygmalion Effect on African American students. White Fragility is so institutionalized that it is often difficult to tackle in the discourse of academia, let alone a policy measure that tackles centuries of educational oppression. Few are discussing why White teachers, counselors and administrators fail to create and build relational educational transactions with students. There is a need for relational learning in lieu of transactional

learning environments, especially for students of color, who are either enrolled in or have the desire to enroll in advanced placement courses. Educational outcomes are indicators of economic outcomes. If students do not have access to, acknowledge the importance of or fail to successfully complete more advanced coursework, they are more likely to work in fields that underpay (Collier 2019c), feeding further into self-manifestations, beliefs acquired from reinforced teacher-student interactions.

2.3. Literature review

Academic achievement gaps between Black and White students are not a new phenomenon. Moreover, there is a wave of old and new research on education inequality and its effect on AA student academic (dis)engagement (Ogbu 2003). In 1966, not long after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, researchers believed that Black students were more likely to be disengaged in classroom settings with White teachers where there are few students who look like them (Coleman et. al 1966). Ironically, special education programs aimed to assist students with lower educational achievement were first offered in St. Louis, MO and later became nationally institutionalized by 1965 (Ogbu 2003). John Uzo Ogbu, an anthropologist and professor, theorized that in addition to proficiency test scores, the academic achievement gap can also be seen in course enrollment, performance in more advanced coursework, gifted program participation and special education (Ogbu 2003). In 1998, evidence-based research revealed a significant test score gap between White and Black students. If we look at empirical data from the National Center for Education Statistics, (over the course of a 30-year time span), the achievement gap persists (Jencks and Phillips 1998). The consistent need for adequate education in the Black community continues beyond No Child Left Behind, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009, Common Core State Standards and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. The conversation continues today but

with more characterization (Dee 2005) of how education policy is seen inside the classroom. Steven Singer, a teacher and blog writer, criticizes the privatization of education in his book *Gadfly on the Wall: A Public School Teacher Speaks Out on Racism and Reform* (Singer 2019). Additionally, much research has been devoted to drop-out rates, (Sefa Dei and Mazzuca 1997) teacher expectations (Liou and Rotheram-Fuller 2019), educational outcome(s) (Feinstein and Peck, n.d.), the intersectionality of discrimination and (dis)engagement (Verkuyten, n.d.) and the psychological applications of the latter (Strambler and Weinstein 2010).

2.4. Section Overview

Before the thesis explores the consequences of teacher-student interactions, this section provides an overview of the literature on (1) why teacher characteristics matter (2) teacher-student interactions and (3) the negative and positive impacts of teacher expectations. The section will also discuss international incidences of teacher expectations to highlight the thesis' global applications.

2.5. Why Teacher Characteristics Matter

According to a review on quasi-experimental studies describing the effects of teacher characteristics on student achievement, statistical tools are able to determine that teacher characteristics, namely: (1) college ratings (2) test scores (3) coursework and (4) certification status, have a positive effect (Wayne, n.d.). However, we are currently unable to state that teacher characteristics do not play a role in student academic achievement (Wayne, n.d.). Wayne and Youngs explore teacher characteristics in an effort to report teacher quality for researchers and policymakers. The review discloses the importance of policy makers to consider better screening protocols for prospective teachers. Research reveals positive student outcomes for students taught by teachers having attended undergraduate institutions of better quality (Wayne, n.d.). Despite a split consensus of the current research, the review reports that

teacher licensure exams and student achievement are more likely to share a relationship, than not (Wayne, n.d.). Although, these findings were based on licensure exams that are not current. Further, the review was not able to conclude on a knowledge base with which teachers ought to be tested (Wayne, n.d.). Regarding coursework, Wayne and Youngs report the following: (1) no concrete results displaying an impact on students learning History and English, (2) negative results displaying an impact on students learning Science and (3) positive results displaying an impact on students learning Mathematics. In other words, teachers having undergone coursework and acquired degrees in these respective subject areas essentially had no relevance in student achievement, except in relation to Math. Finally, certification type, geographic location and the subject area with which teachers are certified drew inconclusive results as current research identified negative impacts on students learning English by certified teachers who teach English for example. Researchers and policy makers should understand that certified teachers who teach English are not necessarily certified in English. Thus, findings regarding teacher certification must be subject-specific. However, results revealed Math teachers did have a positive impact on students learning Mathematics (Wayne, n.d.). By looking at teacher characteristics, their review took into account the components that affect student learning. These components might have an impact on African American student (dis)engagement. However, their research does not incorporate the White-teacher, Black-student social dynamic, a dynamic that this thesis aims to explore in greater detail.

2.6. Teacher-Student Interactions

The teacher-student dynamic is but a layer in the onion of student academic achievement. However, student (dis)engagement has been shown to improve with positive student-teacher relationships (Verkuyten and Thijs 2019). There is a wide range of research on the topic of

teacher-student interactions. However, the teacher-student dynamic and its impact on the academic achievement gap between White and Black students is rarely understood (Dee 2005).

Teacher-student interactions can have passive or active teacher effects, often influencing student confidence, access to AP coursework, homework assistance and eventual employment opportunities (Dee 2005). In the White teacher-Black student dynamic, passive teacher effects are identified by one's racial, ethnic and or/gender identity whereas active teacher effects are typically implicit biases that stem from previous experiences. The overarching message in the literature, particularly as it pertains to African American students, is that implicit biases (often stemming from institutionalized racism), teacher training and professional development as well as the failure to retain minority teachers are all major actors in the White teacher-Black student dynamic (Dee 2005). The question remains as to how the study was truly able to quantify impact when in fact the recruitment and retention of qualified minority teachers eludes many public schools in the U.S.

2.7. Teacher Expectations

2.7.1. Black Teachers, Black Students

Thomas S. Dee looks closely at the interactions between students and teachers with similar demographics, focusing specifically on how teachers from different demographic backgrounds evaluate student behavior and academic performance (Dee 2005). By analyzing teacher perceptions, his research investigates whether "own-race" teacher-student interactions have a positive effect on a student's access to future educational opportunities and overall academic performance (Dee 2005). Despite conflicting literature on how to evaluate teacher perception, Dee used empirical evidence to identify performance levels based on the teacher's perception of the student. However, the study provides little evidence surrounding the reasons why White teacher perceptions of Black students have an impact on Black student academic performance.

Moreover, although the study seeks to differentiate impact of own-race teacher-student interactions, it does not explain the shortage of minority teachers.

2.7.2. White Teachers, Black Students

In a causal model created by researchers at Johns Hopkins University Department of Economics, researchers looked at the distribution of bias in teacher expectations and their impact on student future outcomes. Using instrumental variables, (Papageorge, n.d.) found that White optimism towards the ability for White students often exceeds their optimism for Black students to complete a 4-year degree (Papageorge, n.d.). This is of course seen well before the college level, as the encouragement to enroll, study and test out of AP courses enters the discussion during the second (sophomore) and third (junior) years of high school.

As mentioned in the Introduction, implicit bias has positive and negative forms and both forms are seen in teacher expectations. In a study conducted out of the University of Nebraska, researchers created an econometric model that estimated student acquisition of a college degree in reference to teacher expectations of sophomore students. Their findings revealed teacher expectations and tolerance levels, noting a difference in response to Black boys who displayed disruptive behavior (McGinnis, n.d.). The response difference noted in the University of Nebraska study is relevant to this thesis as it will explore the White-teacher, Black-student dynamic further for the purpose of closing the Black-White student academic achievement gap.

2.7.3. A Global Application of Teacher Expectations

Low teacher expectations is not limited to the U.S. Minority groups around the world are subjected to education inequity due to biased belief systems and racialized social norms. The next section outlines similar observations seen in Romani communities throughout the European Union. The section will also discuss a Russian application.

2.7.3.1. Tackling Antigypsyism in Roma Higher Education

Similar to the White Teacher-Black Student transactional learning paradigm, low expectations of Roma students mirror the *Pygmalion Effect* on African American students. Similar to African Americans, Roma were subjected to 500 years of slavery and excluded from general society. The largest minority in Europe, Romani people endure discrimination in housing, at the work place and in school. Central European University doctoral candidates, Torotcoi and Pecak, studied Romani students in higher education in an effort to describe the challenges of teacher expectations and their impact on Roma student educational outcome(s) (Torotcoi and Pecak, n.d.). Roma students are also less likely to pursue higher education due to low teacher expectations (Torotcoi and Pecak, n.d.). Utilizing the Institutional Departure Model by Vincent Tinto, Torotcoi and Pecak found student success due to resilience and perseverance in spite of low teacher expectations (Torotcoi and Pecak, n.d.).

Similar results were captured in a Russian study. Alieva and Raisa reported behavioral change towards ethnic minority students in classroom settings (Akifyeva Raisa and Alieva 2017). Often driven by stereotypes, White teachers interact quite differently with ethnic minority students, underestimating their strengths, overestimating their weaknesses and ultimately limiting their potential by not providing ethnic minority students the same support as their White peers (Akifyeva Raisa and Alieva 2017). The *Pygmalion Effect* is seen in the Nebraskan, Romani and Russian cases and underscores the significance of teacher expectations in teacher-student interactions. Dee (Dee 2005) elaborates on the notion that White teachers have lower expectations of Black students, creating a lower threshold for growth and learning development. Research towards unraveling these dynamics might explain why Black students lack a desire to proceed to more complicated subject matters, particularly in Math and Science. The *Pygmalion Effect* would explain African American apprehension towards enrolling in AP

courses. Further in transactional learning environments such as Math and Science, students are less likely to be as engaged in these environments as the ostracization and lack of meaningful connections (i.e. disconnections) between White teachers and Black students lead to a lack of confidence, less than desirable learning experiences and even a distaste for the subject matter.

Coupled with the inability or refusal to acknowledge race as an ongoing driving force for the *Pygmalion Effect* in these cases, the White-teacher, Black-student barrier is created and maintained. Black students may or may not be aware of their options but opt to forgo AP and IB courses to avoid the frustration of feeling “uncomfortable” and/or isolated due to barriers created by White teachers. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews and in-class discussion focus groups, the thesis research seeks to utilize CRM to further explore the dynamics of the *Pygmalion Effect* in White-teacher, Black-student interactions as outlined in the literature.

2.8. Conclusion

Before proceeding to the thesis methodology, it is important to note the relevance of teacher characteristics, teacher-student interactions and the impacts of both positive and negative teacher expectations on student academic outcome(s). The apparent barrier(s) or disconnection(s) created by one or all of these is essential to answering the research questions.

Few studies have explored the interaction between these disconnections (Atkinson 2010). For the purpose of this paper, the term “disconnection” refers to 1 of 2 things: (1) The missing link between one’s ability to be academically engaged or (dis)engaged and (2) vacancies where education policies have failed to incorporate the psychosocial complexities of African American student (dis)engagement due to *White Fragility*.

Four major disconnections are revealed in the literature: (1) the failure to acknowledge historical context and its implications on education policy (2) rifts in the teacher-student dynamic starting as early as preschool (Madda 2018) (3) disproportionate disciplining (Staats 2015) and (4) an imbalance of teacher expectations that do not incorporate confounding factors that motivate and cultivate the marginalization of minority students.

Another possible disconnection noted in the literature is teacher competency, especially in low-income school settings as compared to that of more affluent schools (Madda 2018). Teachers from low-income schools may not possess strong Math and Science skills and could bring this apprehension into the classroom, an exchange that plays a role in the student-teacher relationship (Madda 2018). Although the literature points to low-quality schools, testing measures and parenting as key determining factors in improving education, the literature rarely connects education policy measures that analyze White teacher-Black student interactions in the classroom. These disconnections may be directly and/or indirectly linked to the inability of policy makers to create the adequate change needed to revive public education, specifically for Black student academic needs. Teacher expectations, teacher-student interactions, racial discrimination and bias converge to create disconnections that heavily impact Black students, putting current and future Black families at an economic disadvantage.

There are many books written about the U.S.' failure to cultivate competency in urban schools (Bertram 2014). Specifically, a variety of texts discuss the underrepresentation of minorities in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) as the nation continues to fall behind in these areas. A lot of research focuses on achievement gaps between disadvantaged students and students with privilege. However, few dig further into African American student academic (dis)engagement as a manifestation of *White fragility*. This thesis aims to highlight the complex effects of *White Fragility* on student learning and their racial applications in the

decision-making process for policy makers. Given the gap in the literature, investigating the perceptions of *White Fragility* is an essential component of the thesis methodology.

Chapter 3 – METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 is an overview of the purpose of the study, its research questions and a description of the research design, research environment, participants, interview development and implementation and data analysis.

3.1. Research Purpose

The main purpose of this thesis is to examine how high school students, teachers and school administrators perceive the effects of *White Fragility* on African American student academic (dis)engagement, (particularly those enrolled in AP, IB or other rigorous coursework), in Imperial, MO, St. Paul, MN and Jacksonville, NC in the U.S.

3.2. Research Questions

1. How is *White Fragility* perceived by White female teachers in a classroom setting?
2. What effect does *White Fragility* have on student learning?

3.3. Research Design

The researcher traveled to the U.S. to conduct a qualitative case study to determine how high school students, teachers and administrators perceive the effects of *White Fragility* on African American student academic (dis)engagement. The research design offers a “triangular” view that is critically analytical on the perception of the achievement gap and current education policy implementations in the U.S.

For the most part, qualitative research involves non-statistical methods of inquiry and analysis of social interactions. But be not mistaken, qualitative data is quantifiable and the analysis conducted in this study will shed light on this distinction. Qualitative research relies on

deductive and inductive reasoning in which patterns and themes converge using techniques such as interviews, class observations, questionnaires, literature reviews and audio recordings. Qualitative research relies on detailed story-telling from the perspective of its research participants. Communication is one of the most powerful ways in which humans can fully understand other humans. The goal of the study's qualitative research was to gather a better comprehension of the interviewees' perspectives, beliefs, attitudes and insights towards the effects of *White Fragility* on Black-student (dis)engagement and CRM assisted in accomplishing this goal.

The sample size in this study was small. Participants were selected because they have in the past or currently participate in classroom settings that demographically consists of almost-White to all-White students with a White teacher/professor. In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with two African American high school males, one African American female university student, two Caucasian female high school teachers, one African American male doctoral candidate, one European male professor, one African American doctoral candidate director and one Caucasian female administrator. The researcher also conducted two in-class discussion focus groups (with 14 and 8 participants respectively).

The decision to use this "triangular" technique, included the student perspective, he/she who receives the service and teachers and administration, those who take part in service delivery and who have influence on education practices and policies implemented at the school. The idea was to formulate a code book that reveals indicators for student (dis)engagement due to *White Fragility*, a form of implicit bias. Vis-à-vis interviews allowed the researcher to conduct the interviews in a natural setting (at the interviewee's home, in the classroom or office). Vis-à-vis interviews also permitted the freedom to observe body language and genuine human response in real time. SKYPE interviews were surprisingly productive as the researcher was able to record audio and observe some human behavior.

3.4. Critical Theory and the Pygmalion Effect

The psychiatrist, political philosopher and writer Franz Fanon, studied the psychology of colonized non-European peoples that gives rich context in our research framework. Fanon argues that much of what the colonized perceives as her/his world is a direct reflection of European architecture. The psychological effects of racism manifests itself in many ways and sheds light on the anxiety one feels when a teacher, counselor or administrator encourages Black students to avoid enrolling in advanced placement or other more rigorous coursework. The narcissistic abuser squelches the student's voice, diminishing their worth which leads to academic (dis)engagement. These microaggressions, channeled via the Pygmalion Effect, are seen in a study conducted by Verkuyten et al. Their model looks at the interrelations of race/ethnicity, discrimination, social identity and academic (dis)engagement (Verkuyten and Thijs 2019) and further highlights the importance of policy-makers exploring these intersections in the agenda-setting phase of education policy reform.

3.5. Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Methodology

Critical Race Theory (CRT) first emerged as a positive response to the civil rights movement (Ladson-Billings 2010). In its pushback on slow racial reform, CRT was first introduced in Education in 1994. In an effort to progress institutionalized inequalities beyond normalized racism, the discourse brings together the intersection of race and citizenship. Its contributions to race reform are conducted through the art of storytelling. CRT challenges multiculturalism and colorblindness, both of which diminish the importance and relevance of racial distinctions (Ladson-Billings 2010).

Critical Race Methodology (CRM) uses CRT to better examine the intersectionality of race and other knowledge bases such as history, law, sociology and ethnic studies. With the CRT

platform, storytelling helps guide the process of subverting the “master narrative” to provide the Black voice in untold stories that otherwise go unheard.

3.6. Critical Race Methodology and its Role in Education Policy Reform

Although education research is considered objective, it typically is not as objective. The Black voice has historically been muted at the table and eliminated in the agenda-setting process. CRM can provide a framework whereby African American students are free to comfortably discuss the dilemmas of race-relations in the classroom. As teachers, counselors and administrators are seen as authoritative figures, CRM is a tool that undermines biased storytelling (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). By documenting the Black story, (in this case African American students), CRM challenges pedagogy and mainstream research in the following five ways: (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) (1) *elucidates the complexities of intersectionality*, (2) *challenges the so-called “norm”*, (3) *advocates for social justice*, (4) *validates personal experiences in research* and (5) *recalls historical context*.

3.7. Case Study: Imperial, MO, St. Paul, MN and Jacksonville, NC

The U.S. national average for education spending on students was \$11,841 in 2016 and in 2014, \$16,268. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the U.S. spent well above the global average of \$10,759 in 2014. The case study gathered in-depth qualitative data from students and teachers affiliated with three high schools in three cities, including: Imperial, MO, St. Paul, MN and Jacksonville, NC. Below is a table displaying city-specific details pertaining to Imperial, St. Paul, and Jacksonville, (“Public School Review: Imperial, MO” 2019; “Public School Review: St. Paul, Minnesota” 2019; “Onslow County Population” 2019).

Table 3.1. Demographics by City

City	City Population (%)		Student Population (thousands)	Education spending (per child, USD)	Educational Attainment (by race, %)		Unemployment (by race, %)	
	Black	White			Black	White	Black	White
Imperial <small>("Arnold Population" 2019)</small>	0.4	98.2	6,928	11,124 (Mehlville)¹⁰	100	86.38	N/A	5.6
Minneapolis <small>("Minneapolis Population" 2019)</small> (St. Paul)	63.93	18.90	34,570	23,176 (Minneapolis)	74.87	97.07	13.9	4.0
Onslow County <small>("Onslow County Population" 2019)¹¹</small> (Jacksonville)	14.3	74.7	24,489	8,185 (Jacksonville)	87.97	92.45	14.9	9.1

For the purpose of anonymity and ensuring confidentiality, the schools are not disclosed. However, it is relevant to note the number of students in each school, student-teacher ratio as well as their respective Black-White student body representation.

¹⁰ County closest to Imperial, MO.

¹¹ County closest to Jacksonville, NC.

Table 3.2. Demographics by School

Name	Number of Students	Student:Teacher ratio	Black/AA (%)	White (%)
MO school	1809	18:1	N/A	96
MN school	1863	20:1	33	37
NC school	1028	17:1	12	71

3.8. Participants

The participants for this study were two AA high school males, one AA female university student, two Caucasian female high school teachers (one of which teaches General and Honors English and AA Literature, the other Special Education English), one AA male doctoral candidate who researches Critical Race Theory in education, one European male professor who teaches Critical Race Theory at the graduate and doctoral levels, one AA female doctoral program director and one Caucasian female who was a former teacher and principal. The researcher also conducted two in-class discussion focus groups (with 14 and 8 participants respectively). Each participant was asked to participate voluntarily initially via e-mail. Interviews were then scheduled according to the participant's availability. The location was determined also by the participant. The sample included a former principal, a doctoral program director, a graduate professor, a Ph.D. candidate, high school teachers (n=2), high school students (n=2), a college student and two focus groups of diverse high school students (n=22).

The researcher developed three interview protocols (teacher/professor, student and administrator). For each protocol, the researcher co-developed between 4-9 open-ended questions. The interview questions were conjured from several research methodology

resources. Questions ranged from subject topic, length of study or years of teaching, topics on discrimination and *White Fragility*. Each protocol also contained a single vignette of no more than forty words. Forty-five minutes were allotted for each interview. In-class discussions transpired over the course of fifty minutes (duration of regularly schedule class time). The following table shows the review of literature that corresponds to the developed interview questions:

Table 3.3. Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Review of Literature
1. What topics do you teach?	“Qualitative Research Design” (Maxwell 2013)
2. How long have you been teaching?	“Qualitative Research Design” (Maxwell 2013)
3. How do you describe your racial/ethnic background?	“Qualitative Research Design” (Maxwell 2013)
4. How would you define discrimination? What does it look like? Can you give me an example?	“Qualitative Research Design” (Maxwell 2013)
Vignette	“Vignettes” (Given, n.d.)
5. Have you ever heard of the term: “White Fragility”?	“Qualitative Research Design” (Maxwell 2013)
6. Now that I’ve defined “White Fragility” for you, can you think back to a scenario where you responded in a way that would fit the definition of “White Fragility”? Please explain.	“Qualitative Research Design” (Maxwell 2013)

3.9. Procedures

Each participant was asked to participate voluntarily via an e-mail that consisted of the following: (1) Researcher’s Curriculum Vitae (2) Study Information Sheet and (3) Consent form. Interviews were then scheduled according to the participant’s availability. The location was determined also by the interview participant. Prior to the commencement of each

interview, a consent form was physically signed or the interview participant sent a digital confirmation via e-mail. Interview participants were informed that the interview would not exceed forty-five minutes and were also asked to respond to the best of their ability. The data for this thesis was collected by conducting an in-depth audio-taped interview with each interviewee. All participants (individuals) responded to pre-set predetermined questions. However, both focus groups were structured in an open-discussion format that was dependent upon student participation. The interviews began with an overview of the purpose of the study, an assurance of confidentiality and possible consequences given the line of question. The researcher transcribed the audiotapes and identified recurring theme contributions. The researcher created a code for each interviewing participant as to recall race and gender and to ensure that participant anonymity was protected. The interviews were entered into the Atlas.ti software where they were analyzed to answer the research questions.

3.9.1. Student In-Class Focus Discussion

The researcher contacted one of the participating interviews recommended by a MN local. The participating interviewee is a teacher and invited the researcher to discuss the thesis topic during two consecutive AA Literature classes. The researcher was not aware of the demographics of the student body including race or gender, defaulting to a stratified random student sample which ensured a variety of perspective. After obtaining a unanimous show of hands by the students for permission to audio-record the discussion, the in-class discussion occurred during the allotted class hour. At the beginning of the class discussion, the researcher introduced the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality. The researcher transcribed recorded notes and documented class observations from the in-class discussion into a Word document after the class discussions. The researcher created a code for each student participant as to recall race and gender and to ensure that participant anonymity was protected. The

interviews were entered into the Atlas.ti software where they were analyzed to answer the research questions.

Chapter 4 – FINDINGS

4.1. Findings Background

The purpose of this study was to analyze how *White Fragility* is perceived by White teachers and to further determine how *White Fragility* impacts AA student academic (dis)engagement, specifically in AP coursework. The study only used qualitative data. The data was collected using semi-structured interview protocols which provided individual perspectives from students, teachers, professors and a former administrator from three high schools in three cities, including: Imperial, MO, St. Paul, MN and Jacksonville, NC.

Table 4.1. *Coding of the Participants*

Name	Role	Gender	Race
S1	Student	M	B
T1	Literature Teacher	F	W
S2	Student	M	B
S3	Student	M	B
T2	English Teacher	F	W
A1	Principal	F	W

Overview of Themes by Group

Students

Black male students reflected on three major themes that appeared to impede many AA students in majority-White classrooms with White teachers. Race, a lack of belonging and/or isolation as well as being stereotyped were common. Participants often eluded to being "...the only black" or commented on the fact that there were "not many of us". During the focus group discussions, male students were liberal in their commentary but also commented on their level of comfort in classes where there were more AA. There was a general consensus that in advanced classes where there were primarily White students, Black male students felt the need to alter their behavior as pointed out here:

*...in that class I feel like I have to almost keep my head down
and ummm, watch how I say or watch what I say.*

Duly noted were the number of times that Black male students noticed their teachers and counselors having assumptions about their capabilities. This was confirmed by other participants during the in-class discussions. One Black female pointed out her desire to take more advanced coursework:

That's interesting cuz I remember my counselor when I came forward to her about wanting to take harder classes she questioned if I would be ready for that and that made me think like...

The *Pygmalion Effect* can be seen throughout this theme of underestimating Black student capabilities with a perspective offered from a White female student participant:

Umm....from the perspective of someone who is White with that counselor, like she, when she comes to me and questions if I can do something, it comes off as her trying to

test me and make sure that I'm academically ready. But every single person of color¹² that I know that has that counselor, she does not speak to them that same way. She does not give them those opportunities the same way. Without giving them the benefit of the doubt, without asking enough questions, without looking at their files and their track record as a student...more looking at their home life and the way they act in school.

Other commonalities shared amongst Black male participants was a lack of trust amongst their Black peers in advanced courses populated with primarily White students and because of this, many students either do not enroll in or drop advanced courses.

Teachers

A teacher's perspective occurs more frequently through observation. White female teachers revealed several common themes as well. Acknowledging struggles that their AA students endure, they pointed out daily "microaggressions" by teachers and students alike. Interviewees also commented on AA students' tendency to aggregate towards other Black students when enrolling in courses. In so doing, Black students are more likely to feel "comfortable" amongst their peers. Black students take on less challenging courses because of peer-to-peer feedback. If the course is too challenging to one, it is perceived as overwhelming to all as noted here by a Black female student who interrupted one teacher's interview:

I think the reason why a lot of Black kids, a lot of minorities don't take these AP classes, because they get hard. It's just inundating. I've been in a lot of AP classes and I just stay in them because I got nothing else to do and I feel like might as well just stay in it. But you don't feel comfortable in there like you don't.

Both teachers saw themselves as advocates for AA students and were often considered the "go-to" or safe haven for Black male and female students equally. The women also reflected on condescending teachers who repeatedly underestimate student capabilities, a lack of teacher

¹² Person or student of color in this context are referring to Black, African or African American people.

encouragement or relational support, a disregard for racist behavior and Black-White student conflict.

When asked about *White Fragility*, both teachers were aware of the term. When asked to define *White Fragility*, they eluded to behavioral outbursts such as complaining, crying, anger and silence. Additionally, both teachers reflected on their own personal conflicts with specific examples such as the one outlined here:

This was about 4 years ago and it was called Sandoffa. It's really cool. You go through this whole...you did that (referring to Student A) and at the time we were doing Civil Rights in African American literature and I wanted to show some clips from Selma. And they were furious. "Why are you showing us this?!" And I didn't understand what the anger was about. I just didn't understand it.

One distinction the researcher observed with interviewing teachers was their insistence on the need to keep learning about their own *White Fragility*. Finally, both were aware enough to personalize their being "less fragile"(Collier 2019c).

Administrators

The Administrator has a different role entirely. They are responsible for advocating for the student as well as their staff (i.e. teachers). The task is difficult as pointed out by the sole administrator interviewee. She struggled with her role to support teachers in particular, often taking students' sides and only later learning to provide better staff support. A common theme noted with this former principal of sixteen years (and teacher of 35 years), was her observation of tracking students. Tracking occurs when teachers and administrators group students with similar capabilities into classes according to those capabilities.

How do I define what tracking is... that we don't put up any barriers for kids to take courses that we have predetermined. So that would be typically in a high school...certain kids (and often this is [...]) kids would take AP classes, kids would take College in the Schools (because we're an International Baccalaureate school) and I've

felt it is absolutely imperative that those classes actually have expectations that kids take those courses so... it be Honors for ALL.

According to the interviewee, tracking is particularly used disproportionately towards AA:

So I'm very adamant about not tracking but I have been for many years and paid the price for that but I just, I just honestly, I don't believe in it. I believe in differentiation, I believe in more personalized learning. I believe in developing equitable relationships umm between students within the classroom. So the way the system is set up right now so much of it is contrary to really servicing our kids...

Themes and Patterns of Combined Groups

Between the three groups, (students, teachers and the administrator), as well as the in-class group discussions, there was a common theme of AA students being faced with “barriers”.

One teacher referred to the “barrier” as “transactional teaching” as discussed here:

Like, let's say that I'm in a predominantly White class, that my relationship with them is transactional. You do the work, I give you the grade, it's a transactional business arrangement. Right? I think, I think and I'm not trying to say everybody, White teachers who mostly teach White classes are taught and trained into a system of transaction. You do this, I do this. I do this, you do this. Whereas it seems like other classes are more relational. And it's difficult for some teachers who are used to...because that's how they went to school and it's transactional.

Another White male student describes “barrier” like this:

I feel like that teachers may have some sort of disconnect with the colored students whereas they immediately assume they won't be able to relate to someone and that like builds a barrier for like helping the student in the class or the student even wanting to go up and talk to them, so that creates that disconnect.

Finally, the administrator referred to the word “barrier” in this context:

They're putting up what we call all kinds of barriers in order for kids, umm, to even see themselves as viable and that happens with counselors and happens with teachers. We don't necessarily have any skills to personalize learning.

4.2. Atlas.ti

Atlas.ti is a platform that permits researchers to categorize large quantities of qualitative data (including text, audio, visual and graphics), systematically (Muhr 2004). The software permitted the researcher to explore relationships between common themes, words and phrases observed on audio recordings and hand-written notes. Tools such as coding, networking and memo extraction allowed the researcher to create complex connections, generating new ideas that assisted in revealing deeper human processes and social networks.

4.3. Limitations

Atlas.ti weighs heavily on the researcher's experience and perspective. The researcher had never used the software, was self-taught and used a free trial which limited the size of the project. It is also important to recognize the potential for researcher bias. The researcher is an African American female who attended school settings similar to the ones discussed throughout the study. She has developed certain perspectives about education inequality. Nevertheless, an effort was made to remain as impartial as possible.

Transcribed interviews were uploaded on to the *Atlas.ti* software. After reading the transcripts, codes were created based on common words and themes used during interviews.

Words such as *White Fragility*, *barrier*, *segregation* and *transactional learning* served as guides for the analysis. The codebook was created to be used for further inquiry and connection.

• Barrier - low expectations, Pygmalion Effect Created: 6/11/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier
• Barrier - other variables (adolescence, #students, subject) Created: 6/11/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier
• Barrier - White Fragility (teacher) Created: 6/11/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier
• Black Perception - Discrimination Created: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier
• Black Perception - Lack of diversity Created: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier
• Black Student Exposure - racial bias acclimation Created: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier
• Disengagement - Avoidance Created: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/16/19 by Israel Collier
• Disengagement - Condescending/patronizing Created: 6/12/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/16/19 by Israel Collier
• Disengagement - Student drops class Created: 6/11/19 by Israel Collier, Modified: 6/16/19 by Israel Collier

Figure 4.1. Section of *Atlas.ti* Codebook

The researcher generated a series of reports outlining connections between codes and direct quotations. Finally, the researcher was able to quantify specific words and phrases repeated throughout the transcripts and collected them in an Excel spreadsheet for future reference.

4.4. Discussion of Atlas.ti Results

Although several connections and relationships were observed throughout the analysis, one of the biggest distinctions observed was the correlation between several “disengagement” codes and “transactional learning”. Student isolation due to few students of color in the classroom, makes the student feel uncomfortable. If coupled with a transactional learning environment, one could see how a student might become disengaged.

The researcher also noticed quite a bit of overlap between “disengagement” and “barrier” codes. Depending on the barrier code’s affiliation, such as with the “Pygmalion Effect”, “low expectations” or “White Fragility”, it was inferred that there is a relationship between *White Fragility* and (dis)engagement. Surprisingly however, “White Fragility” did not appear to directly influence student academic (dis)engagement but the software indirectly linked it to “tracking”. In other words, one’s inability to acknowledge racial bias and Black oppression supports the disproportionality of tracking. If the notion that White teachers, when forced to acknowledge race must absorb the responsibility of racial oppression (as the dominant race), instead deflect that responsibility, this leaves a painful impression on African American students that their oppression is not relevant, making tracking for African American students legitimate. “I’m going to point the finger at him...”(Collier 2019b)

It seems a barrier would be created if in fact Black oppression is acknowledged as a general benefit for Whites. The learning transaction thus challenges White superiority, creating for a less relational learning environ. Instinctively, White teachers feel compelled to maintain a transactional learning environment to sustain that dichotomy. If they change this dichotomy, it

changes how they think about themselves and simultaneously changes how Black students perceive themselves.

Chapter 5 – CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Education offers a sense of purpose and the knowledge base needed to contribute towards society. The concept behind teacher-student interactions is to provide rich learning experiences, as teacher-student relationships influence student performance. This thesis has elaborated on barriers that are created in transactional learning environments between White teachers and Black students, leaving Black students feeling isolated and bored. Further, due to the Pygmalion Effect, Black students are made to believe that they are not prepared for advanced placement courses that have future significance and economic relevance.

The interview data confirms disengagement due to these barriers and indirectly links *White Fragility* to academic (dis)engagement. The data also suggests that the perception of *White Fragility*, even if made aware, continues to go unrecognized and is therefore more difficult to directly link to AA student academic (dis)engagement.

Current education policy is based on antiquated belief systems, perspectives and ideas. These policies do not provide equitable education for Black students. U.S. policy actors would be enlightened to know of these research findings. Coupled with the loss of personalized learning and gain of massive high schools in an environment where teachers are unaware of his/her bias or who are unwilling to acknowledge the injustices imposed on Black students, supports the researcher's theory. Black students are more likely to become academically disengaged in settings that fail to support them due to *White Fragility*, as evident in the persistent Black-White academic achievement gap.

5.1. Recommendations

The researcher recommends further analysis of the qualitative data and remaining transcripts. At the time of publication, two transcripts remained unanalyzed. Moreover, in respect to tracking in public schools, its relevance in demographically different families ought to be explored further. How and why students are considered to have disabilities needs scrupulous assessment; this reevaluation could eliminate the need for Special Education and tracking. Placing students of like mind in the same courses and classrooms is not a challenge for any student. In that same vein, States such as Missouri can learn from Minnesota and North Carolina given their alternatives to suspension. Removing suspension from Missouri State policies will decrease the level of (dis)engagement in Black students and steer the State away from the school-to-prison pipeline epidemic. Finally, the OECD Learning Framework 2030 (“The Future We Want” 2018) has implemented a plan that indeed incorporates social, economical and cultural aspects of student life into an overall strategic plan towards relational learning experiences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Informed Consent

Interview Consent Form

I, the undersigned, have read and understood the Study Information Sheet provided by Israel Collier. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the Study. I understand that taking part in the Study will include being interviewed and audio recorded. I have been given adequate time to consider my decision and I agree to take part in the Study. I understand that my personal details such as name and employer address will not be revealed to people outside the project. I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs but my name will not be used. I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any material related to this project to Israel Collier. I understand that I can withdraw from the Study at any time and I will not be asked any questions about why I no longer want to take part.

Name of Participant: _____ Date:

Researcher Signature: _____ Date:

(Source: Adapted from Alan Bryman (2012), Social Research Methods)

Appendix 2: Study Information Sheet

African American Student Academic (Dis)engagement: A Manifestation of White Fragility in the Classroom

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. After which, you are welcome to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT

My name is Israel Collier, Masters Candidate from the School of Public Policy at Central European University located in Budapest, Hungary. I decided on the thesis topic as it is directly germane to my own learning and development process. The overall aim of the study is to determine the extent to which a term labeled White Fragility (a form of implicit-bias), has a direct impact on academic engagement, specifically that of African American students in mostly-white to all-white classrooms. Moreover, given the results, the study would like to identify historical flaws and current shortcomings in education policy. Further, the study plans to offer policy recommendations that would underline antiquated policy measures and if genuinely implemented could reveal more positive results, specific to the economic progression of African American students, in moving towards the future.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Taking part in the research could involve one of two things:

- (1) a formal interview and/or
- (2) permitting class observations

The interview would last no more than 45 minutes and would be followed-up by a thank you email and survey (questions specifically germane to the discussion during the scheduled interview). A formal interview would involve the following:

- (1) An initial introduction via email. The email contains an information sheet and consent form.
- (2) Coordinating a day, time and location for the interview (in-person or via SKYPE, Duo or Messenger).
- (3) Interview Protocol:
 - (a) Introductory to the proceedings and confirmation of consent
 - (b) Introductory questions
 - (c) General discussion
 - (d) Short vignette
 - (e) Wrap-up questions
 - (f) Concluding statements

Topics to be discussed are as follows:

- (1) Academic Position and general school environment
- (2) General description of administrator, teacher and/or student roles
- (3) White Fragility
- (4) Student Engagement and Disengagement

Classroom Observations would involve the following:

- (1) Researcher takes notes during a scheduled class discussion.
- (2) If warranted and permitted, researcher can give a general explanation for the class observations.
- (3) If warranted and permitted, class discussion may be audio-recorded.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

Administrators, teachers and students selected to participate in the study were selected because they have in the past or currently participate in classroom settings with the demographic description described above.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Your participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation and/or any questions and may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

The study seeks to uphold the teachings and mission of Central European University, that being as unbiased as possible, open to free-thinking and promoting advocacy, justice and the protection of human rights. Further, irrespective of the results, the study intends to contribute to United States and/or Missouri Education policy in a holistic and progressive way. Participants may undergo a series of emotion, ranging from contentment, awe, surprise, sadness, anger, revelation, etc. Participants are at risk, as some questions as well as the general direction of the discussion may cause unexpected adverse responses.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

Your identity is completely confidential. If the researcher has a strong belief that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either the participant or another individual (e.g. physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed. Non-anonymized data (i.e. signed consent forms and audio recordings) are collected and retained as part of the research process.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

The interview will be recorded on the researcher's cell phone and/or a portable recorder. After the interviews are annotated, analyzed and coded, results will be revealed in the Master's thesis to be held at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary or Vienna, Austria until after the degree has been conferred. A transcript of interviews, in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. If needed thereafter, participants will be contacted and consulted directly. Under freedom of information legalization, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The researcher plans to present the study's findings at the Emerging Researchers' Conference (of which the abstract has already been accepted) in Hamburg, Germany in September 2019. The results may also have implications for further doctoral research and dissertation.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

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Appendix 3: Interview protocol(s)

Administrator Interview

Pre-Interview Script

This interview is being conducted for the purpose of collecting qualitative data for a research study. The data results will be presented in a thesis paper that will be officially submitted in completion of a Master's degree. The study researches learning disengagement among African American or Black students who are taught in mostly white classrooms by white teachers. Academic engagement (or the lack thereof, i.e. Disengagement) have shown to play a role in future economic advancement. Participants are asked and encouraged to answer all questions to the best of their ability but are not obligated to answer. The interview should not last more than 20 minutes, during which time I may be recording the interview for future reference. Do you have any questions for me? Let's begin.

1. How long have you been in administration?
2. Why have you decided to stay in an administrative role?
3. What sort of tools do you use to teach/mentor students? To mentor teachers?
4. How do you describe your racial/ethnic background?
5. What does discrimination mean to you?
6. Have you ever dealt with any grievances of discrimination by Black students? How did you handle/cope with the situation?
7. Vignette
8. A. Have you ever heard of the term: "White Fragility"?
B. Now that I've defined "White Fragility" for you, can you think back to a scenario where you responded in a way that would fit the definition of "White Fragility"? Please explain.

Post-Interview Script

This concludes the interview. You are encouraged to ask questions at this point or anytime thereafter. You will be apprised of research results as an appreciation of your participation. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time.

Student Interview

Pre-Interview Script

This interview is being conducted for the purpose of collecting qualitative data for a research study. The data results will be presented in a thesis paper that will be officially submitted in completion of a Master's degree. The study researches learning disengagement among African American or Black students who are taught majority-White classrooms taught by White teachers. Academic engagement (or the lack thereof, i.e. Disengagement) have shown to play a role in future economic advancement. Participants are asked and encouraged to answer all questions to the best of their ability but are not obligated to answer. The interview should not last more than 30 minutes, during which time I may be recording the interview for future reference. Do you have any questions for me? Let's begin.

1. From what ethnic background do you associate with?
2. Highschool: What grade are you in? What's your favorite subject?
College/University: What year are you? What are you studying?
3. What are the demographics of your school?
4. What does discrimination mean to you? What does it look like?
5. Can you describe a situation where you felt you were being discriminated against?
6. Vignette: Lucy, John and Kate always raise their hand. You like to participate in class too but every time you raise your hand Ms. Morganford does not pick you, she picks either Lucy, John or Kate.
7. How would this scenario make you feel?
8. Why do you think Lucy, John and Kate are always picked in class?
9. What courses have you taken in high school? Why did you choose those courses?
10. Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Who has helped you see and/or understand your goals and aspirations?

Post-Interview Script

This concludes the interview. You are encouraged to ask questions at this point or anytime thereafter. You will be apprised of research results as an appreciation of your participation. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time.

Teacher/Professor Interview

Pre-Interview Script

This interview is being conducting for the purpose of collecting qualitative data for a research study. The data results will be presented in a thesis paper that will be officially submitted in completion of a Master's degree. The study researches learning disengagement among African American or Black students who are taught in majority White-classrooms taught by White teachers. Academic engagement (or the lack thereof, i.e. Disengagement) have shown to play a role in future economic advancement. Participants are asked and encouraged to answer all questions to the best of their ability but are not obligated to answer. The interview should not last more than 20 minutes, during which time I may be recording the interview for future reference. Do you have any questions for me? Let's begin.

1. What topics do you teach? How long have you been teaching?
2. What sort of tools do you use to teach students? Have you found that Black students learn differently from their White counterparts?
3. How do you describe your racial/ethnic background?
4. How would you define discrimination? What does it look like? Can you give me an example?
5. Vignette
8. Have you ever heard of the term: "White Fragility"?
9. Now that I've defined "White Fragility" for you, can you think back to a scenario where you responded in a way that would fit the definition of "White Fragility"? Please explain.

Post-Interview Script

This concludes the interview. You are encouraged to ask questions at this point or anytime thereafter. You will be apprised of research results as an appreciation of their participation. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time.