

Counter-Storytelling: Portraits of Black Students' Lived Experiences in a Rural Gifted
Education Program

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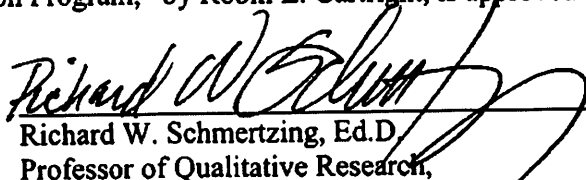
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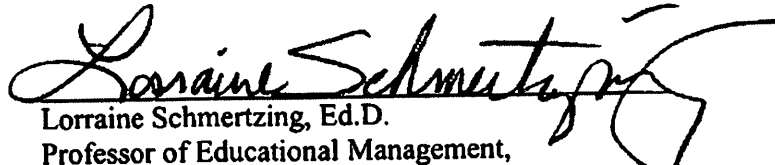
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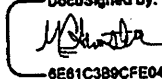

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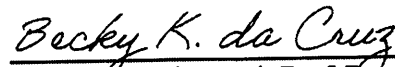
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Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of gifted Black students in a rural Georgia school district. Gifted education programs are often touted as providing high-ability students access to challenging and engaging curriculum that builds on their curiosity, creativity, and persistence. However, Black students face obstacles, which prevent them from being identified for and retained in gifted education programs, making them the most underrepresented non-White group in gifted education. As a result of this educational inequity, gifted Black students are subordinated by race, underserved, overlooked, and denied access to the challenging education they deserve. Related existing research and theory included past studies on the recruitment and retention of Black students in gifted education programs. This study was designed to provide an original contribution to the research base by sharing first-person portraits of six gifted Black students who recently graduated from high school. A series of three interviews was completed with each participant, and these interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using in vivo coding. Once analysis was complete, counterstories were created for each participant, spotlighting the good in each story. Four main themes were determined: *Relationships are important to the participants' social and academic lives; Participants share the characteristics of a strong racial identity; Participants possess a love of learning and of academic challenge; and Participants have a strong need for achievement.* Each theme was then broken into subcategories with supporting commentary from participants' stories.

Keywords: critical race theory, gifted education, portraiture, underrepresentation, acting White

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all the underrepresented, marginalized gifted students who have not been given the educational opportunities they deserve through no fault of their own, but due to the inherent racism that dominates gifted education programs.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Gifted education programs are those in which the curricula uses principles of differentiated instruction to develop cognitive learning, as well as research, reference, and metacognitive skills of students identified as gifted (GADOE, 2020). These programs are often touted as providing high-ability students access to challenging and engaging curriculum that builds on their curiosity, creativity, and persistence. Students are typically recruited into these programs through standardized test scores and teacher referrals. While these measures provide inclusion in gifted education for some students, they often act as obstacles for culturally diverse gifted students, especially Black students. On the rare instance when a gifted Black student is identified and served for his or her talent, a new challenge arises: retention in the gifted program. These obstacles historically led to Black students being the most underrepresented non-White group in gifted education, illuminating Derrick Bell's (1992) assertion that racism continues to be an endemic and permanent part of American society. As a result of this educational inequity, gifted Black students are subordinated by race, underserved, overlooked, and denied access to the challenging education they deserve.

For the last 4 years of my classroom teaching experience, the majority of my students were identified by the state of Georgia as gifted learners. Being a teacher of gifted students was my dream job, and after 10 years of teaching English to general education students, my dream came true. My mentor, the school's only gifted English

teacher, retired, and I was asked to take her place. I was fresh off of finishing my gifted endorsement classes, and I passed the high school English Georgia Assessment for the Certification of Educators (GACE) that was required for teaching ninth-grade English to eighth-grade students. When I received my stack of permanent records for my first gifted classes of students, two things became clear: those were some very smart kids, and those classes were a lot less diverse than I was used to. This fact stayed with me as I moved from classroom teacher to system-level curriculum and gifted director, and when I began my doctoral journey in the fall of 2018, I had no question as to what my area of interest would be. During the early days of doctoral coursework, I created an initial concept map for my potential study. Once my coursework was complete and I became a doctoral candidate, I sought and received IRB approval (see Appendix A) for the study. I was then ready and eager to begin my research.

Minimally-guided interviews of gifted Black high school graduates were the primary data sources for this study. Interviews were audio recorded to assist with transcription. Audio transcriptions, as well as my own memos, were analyzed through a critical race theory (CRT) lens. The participants' stories were put together to reduce the data, which I then coded in order to determine patterns, themes, and concepts present in the data. I used both categorizing and connecting strategies as described by Maxwell (2013) to develop a comprehensive account of the participants' stories, allowing me to find similarities and differences in the data without entirely losing the context of the participants' experiences, as often happens with analyzing data solely by coding. After memoing on the data, I used a Google spreadsheet as a type of matrix to organize patterns and determine the overall themes. Each participant's responses were analyzed separately

before a comparative analysis of all six participants' experiences was conducted. This ensured that no one perspective was seen as dominant over the other five. By using powerful first-person narratives, I wove together a portrait of what it is like to be young, gifted, and Black in my participants' own words.

Background of Study

When I was in elementary school, I was frequently told, by teachers and classmates alike, that I was one of the smartest girls in the class. My best friend Brian was always considered to be one of the smartest boys in the class. We both made E's in all of our subjects, and for fun, we played Trivial Pursuit, Jr. in the media center while other students worked on phonics and math skills. As much as a 7-year-old could think logically about such things, I considered Brian and I to be intellectual equals--until we were tested for gifted services. I remember being pulled out of class for 3-4 days to participate in some fun testing exercises and conversations with the guidance counselor. A week later, Brian was also pulled out of class for the same things. After discussing our experiences, we decided we were both soon going to be participating in the gifted program, which was a very prestigious program in our small, rural school.

About 2 weeks after I was tested, I asked my mom when I was going to start going to the smart class. She hesitated for quite a while before telling me that I was "two points away from being gifted," so I wouldn't be participating in the program. I was devastated. At school the next day, I asked Brian if he was sad that he didn't make the program. He responded by telling me he did get into the program and would start going to Mr. Tassel's office twice a week with the other gifted students. I could not believe it. How could Brian qualify for gifted when I did not? After that, I participated in phonics

lessons and math drills that bored me to tears. No more Trivial Pursuit, Jr. or enrichment activities for me.

Thirty years later, I became a language arts teacher of gifted and talented students and in my third year of working with these students, I met Adrian (pseudonym). Adrian was a Black student who qualified as gifted in the area of math. I knew about Adrian because my math counterpart taught him in seventh grade and told me about him. He came from a troubled background and even went through anger management therapy as a preteen due to his tendency for aggressive behaviors. I knew Adrian was not the kind of student I wanted in my classroom. But as luck would have it, Adrian was placed in gifted language arts as an eighth grader, and after a few weeks of having him in class, I knew this troubled youngster with a less-than-ideal home situation was going to become someone special to me. He tried to hide his intelligence from me and his classmates, but I would not let him. My daily goal was to get Adrian to share his ideas in front of his peers, and over the course of the year, I saw him flourish and become a much stronger language arts student. I began to wonder what would have happened to Adrian if I had not changed my preconceived attitude about him, or if he ended up with a teacher who did not want to put the effort into this example of a traditionally underrepresented gifted child.

These two experiences stand out as defining events in my life. After seeing Adrian falter a bit in high school, then end up not going to college and fathering a child less than a year after graduating from high school, I began to really think about underrepresented groups, especially females and Black males, in gifted education. I began to focus more on Adrian's story than mine, and I wondered what would have happened to him if he was given access to adults who pushed his intellect and motivated

him to not be satisfied with the status quo. I wondered what his perceptions were of the gifted services he received in middle school as opposed to his experiences in high school. Did he feel as if he were ready to continue on a path of growing his intellect and knowledge after high school graduation? Did peer or societal influences work to alter his path? What made Adrian's outcome/experience different from another gifted Black male student I taught in the same class, who ended up at the University of Georgia? Was it a difference in perceptions of these two students that made the difference in their post-graduation paths?

As my school system's gifted coordinator, it is heartbreaking when I receive eligibility reports indicating that the issue of gifted Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education programs is still alive and well in our schools. Not only is it more difficult for these talented students to qualify for gifted services, but it is also difficult for them to remain in the program once deemed eligible. I made it my goal to learn from these students in order to work with the state gifted directors to review gifted policies and procedures to determine what I can do to end segregation within Georgia's gifted education programs.

Statement of Problem

Over the past 3 decades, researchers documented the continued underrepresentation of Black students in gifted and talented education. Authors such as Carman (2011), Vega and Moore (2018), and Giessman, Gambrell, and Stebbins (2013) found copious literature supporting this educational inequity and the factors that lead to it. Nationwide data also supported the literature. During the 2013-2014 school year, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR, n.d.) reported the overall populations of K-12 public

school students as follows: 50.4% White, 24% Hispanic, 15.5% Black, and 10.1% other races. However, student populations in gifted education were as follows: 58.2% White, 18% Hispanic, 13.9% other races, and 9.9% Black (OCR, n.d.). According to the 20% equity allowance formula posited by Ford (2013), the population of Black students in gifted education should have been at least 13.6%, which indicated a difference of 3.7 percentage points. These data supported researchers' (Carman, 2011; Giessman, Gambrell, & Stebbins, 2013; Plucker, Wells, & Meyer, 2022; Vega & Moore, 2018) findings that, despite efforts to correct this inequity, Black students as a group continue to be underrepresented in gifted education, thereby denying these students the chance to meet their full educational potential. When gifted Black students are not identified and therefore do not receive gifted services, they are unfairly denied access to educational experiences that allow them to "develop skills not provided by their [traditional] environment" (Frasier, 2011a, p. 7), such as critical-thinking skills, test-taking skills, and effective study habits. These students also miss out on experiences that build the foundation for future academic growth while slowly losing the gifts and talents they already possessed (Frasier, 2011b). According to Ford (2020), Black students' "underrepresentation in gifted education has great economic, political, and social consequences" (p. x), which could be detrimental to our diverse society as a whole.

While there have been several studies regarding Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education programs (Grissom & Redding, 2016; Hodges, Tay, Maeda & Gentry, 2018; List & Dykeman, 2021; Yaluma & Tyner, 2018), few researchers explored the perspectives of gifted Black students who recently graduated from a rural gifted education program. Many researchers focused on students of color's

recruitment, or lack of, into gifted programs (Bernal, 2002; Ford, 2014a; Hemmler, Azano, Dmitrieva, & Callahan, 2022; Hodges, Tay, Maeda, & Gentry, 2018; Yaluma & Tyner, 2018), but few studied this educational inequity from the retention perspective. The six participants in my study were successfully recruited into a gifted education program but may or may not have succeeded or remained in the program for the duration of their K-12 career, allowing me to focus on the retention aspect of underrepresentation.

Based on previous research that showed little to no impact on Black students' representation in gifted education, there is a continued need to increase understanding of this issue. In this qualitative study, I explored the *lived experiences* (Boylorn, 2008) of gifted Black students throughout their participation in gifted education programs, the meanings they make of those experiences, and how those meanings influence their beliefs about gifted education. Using rich, thick descriptions in the participants' own voices, I created a vehicle for those voices, adding to the current body of knowledge and bringing additional awareness to this educational disparity, thereby disrupting the status quo. The additional knowledge described in this study is significant for several reasons as outlined in the following section.

Significance of Study

Despite their growing numbers in the overall population of the United States, culturally-diverse students continue to be underrepresented in K-12 gifted education as racism remains a permanent and pervasive barrier to equitable educational opportunities for these students (Bell, 1992; Ford, 2013; OCR, n.d.; Plucker & Peters, 2017).

According to Lewis and Novak (2022), "Gifted education was born on the wrong side of history, and it has always remained entrenched in the folds of racism's robes: inequitable,

biased, and disproportionate, a cog that reinforces systemic marginalization in every step of the educational system” (p. 2). Kozol (2005) likened the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education to an apartheid educational system that was in place before the *Brown v. Board of Education* legislation. While referring to Black males specifically, Whiting (2006) stated that those students typically “have an underdeveloped sense of academic identity, are less likely to persist in school...less likely to be high achievers...and less likely to be identified as gifted” (p. 223). Researchers studied the issues of Black students’ recruitment (Ford, 2013; Warne, Anderson, & Johnson, 2013) and retention (Ford, 2013; Frye & Vogt, 2010) in gifted education programs for years, yet this problem of underrepresentation remains. While there are numerous studies containing data on standardized tests (Brigham & Bakken, 2014; Ford, 2014b; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Lamb, Boedeker, & Kettler (2019) and teacher perceptions (Allen, 2017; Davis, Ford, Moore, & Floyd, 2020; Ford, 2015; Whiting, 2009), there is a dearth of research on the experiences of gifted Black students while enrolled in a rural gifted education program. My goal for this study was to illuminate the students’ side of this issue by sharing a space for their voices to be heard where they are typically kept silent.

The focus of this research was to provide valuable insights into the lives of Black students who were identified as gifted and who participated in a rural gifted education program. As there is a continued discrepancy between the percentage of Black students in the general K-12 population and the percentage of Black students in K-12 gifted education, this study adds to the current body of research by providing the perspectives of gifted Black students’ experiences in gifted education. I also shared my findings with the superintendent and gifted eligibility team from the students’ former rural school district,

allowing local policy makers and educators to take those student experiences and make equitable enrollment in gifted education a reality for gifted Black students.

The findings generated from this study will no doubt bring positive changes to not only the rural school system attended by the participants but also to similar rural school systems with the same underrepresentation issue. By examining and illuminating gifted Black students' experiences in gifted education programs, local education leaders will know in which areas to make adjustments to improve student experiences and improve the chances of gifted Black students remaining in gifted education programs. In addition, I will use my findings along with my role as system gifted coordinator to work with the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE), which is the state agency charged with the management of K-12 education (GADOE, 2020), as well as the Georgia Association for Gifted Children (GAGC) on changing policies and procedures that promote exclusion of Black and other culturally diverse students from gifted education programs. While the GADOE (2020) does allow local boards of education flexibility in some areas of gifted education such as choice of instructional models used, gifted eligibility requirements are mandated by the state and local boards must "adopt eligibility criteria that are consistent with this [state] rule" (p. 6). For example, students are required to meet criteria in three of four areas, two of which include standardized assessments from a list of approved tests. My findings provide support for the need to change eligibility criteria to include more culturally diverse students in gifted education.

Now that my research is finished and my participants' stories are shared, I will move towards meeting the ambitious goal of critical race theory (CRT), which is "to dismantle systemic inequality by calling attention to it" (Marx, 2008, p. 163).

Specifically, I want to help create gifted and talented programs that disrupt the norm. Narrative storytelling is vital to CRT studies (Marx, 2008), so I will use each participant's powerful, engaging first-person narrative to illuminate the struggles and the victories each faced. By transporting the readers of my research into my participants' compelling lived experiences, readers will see the issue of systemic educational racism through different perspectives and hopefully be moved to disrupt it. In order to accomplish this task, I worked to answer specific research questions key to the study.

Research Questions

As a novice researcher at the beginning of this study, I understood that my initial research questions could change, allowing me the opportunity to make revisions to my research questions as needed. To fill the identified gap in the literature, provide insight into the experiences of rural gifted Black students, and offer recommendations on how rural school systems can correct Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education, two preliminary research questions guided this qualitative study:

Research Question 1. What lived experiences did gifted Black students have while participating in a rural gifted education program?

Subquestion a. What common experiences did participants find to be life changing and life affirming?

Subquestion b. What unique experiences served as important context to each participant's path through gifted education?

Research Question 2. How do gifted Black students make sense of these lived experiences?

Research question one will be answered through participant portraits in Chapter 4. Subquestions a and b will be answered in both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, where I discuss the commonalities between the participants' stories as well as participants' unique experiences. Research question two will also be answered in Chapter 5 as I discuss the themes I created after reading and analyzing participants' interview data. These research questions guided me through the study and helped me accomplish my goals as described in the following section.

Research Goals

To achieve my research goals, in this study, I focused on the experiences of traditionally underrepresented Black students in a gifted education program in a rural Georgia school system. As this topic is of both personal and professional importance to me, I incorporated Maxwell's (2013) three-pronged goals approach to my study, using personal, intellectual, and practical goals to help guide me. This topic grew from my personal experiences as a teacher of gifted students, thus the first goals I developed were personal ones. I have always been deeply committed to my students, which motivated me to become more aware of the experiences of Black gifted students to determine what influences these students to perform (or underperform) within a gifted education program. Throughout the study, I furthered my commitment to the inclusion and achievement of traditionally underrepresented gifted students and continue to work to remedy this racially-imbalanced setting, which I believe leads to an imbalance of educational opportunity and significantly fewer future possibilities for these underrepresented students.

Intellectually, this study helped me extend the existing research on the experiences of underrepresented Black students in rural gifted education programs. The findings and recommendations developed through this study have the potential to advance this area of knowledge, allowing policy makers to truly hear the voices of these students in order to bring about transformation of a predominantly White program and end the systemic denial of Black students to gifted education programs. Armed with the knowledge gained from this study, other education racial disparities, such as overrepresentation of Black students in special education, can be questioned and challenged, leading to more equitable access to appropriate educational settings.

In a practical sense, this study resulted in rich data collection of the stories and experiences of gifted Black students who participated in a rural gifted education program. Through minimally-guided participant interviews, I was able to elevate the voices of traditionally marginalized Black gifted students, justifying the need for changes within my school system's gifted education program and helping to develop those changes. This goes hand-in-hand with my second practical goal of providing useful insights for gifted educators working with Black students within the gifted classroom. While Maxwell (2013) suggested that researchers not base research questions or study design on practical goals, they were important in helping me stay focused during the study. A brief summary of the methodology I used during this study is discussed in the following section.

Summary of Methodology

For this study, I used a combination of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) and counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to describe the lived experiences of six recently-graduated gifted Black students. The combination of these two qualitative

methods was most appropriate for this study because I wanted to share the *good* (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) of these students' experiences in a gifted education program as well as illustrate how all six participants' stories go against the majority viewpoint that Black students do not succeed in gifted education programs. Definitions of terms used throughout the study are defined in the next section to provide background knowledge to those unfamiliar with gifted education.

Definition of Terms

In this section, I defined important terms to enhance the reader's understanding of the main concepts related to gifted education that may not be known by outsiders to the field. The background knowledge presented in the list below will help ensure deeper understanding of the study's topic, as well as a common language between the researcher and the reader. For the purpose of this study, I used the following terms to mean the definitions below:

Culturally-diverse students—Students from diverse backgrounds, including those of Black, Hispanic, and Asian descent, those learning English as a second language, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (NAGC, 2019).

Differentiated curriculum—Courses that are differentiated are those in which the content, teaching strategies, and expectations of student mastery have been adjusted to be appropriate for gifted students (GADOE, 2020).

Georgia Association for Gifted Children (GAGC)—GAGC is an affiliate of the National Association for Gifted Children whose purpose is to promote an awareness of the needs of Georgia's gifted students, stimulate a deeper understanding of and interest in the needs of the gifted, provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas among

the organization, encourage the best possible training for gifted educators, and encourage research in the field of gifted education (Georgia Association for Gifted Children, 2019).

Georgia Department of Education (GADOE)—GADOE is the agency charged with the fiscal and administrative management of certain aspects of K-12 public education including the implementation of federal and state mandates (GADOE, 2020).

Gifted education program—A gifted education program is one in which the curricula for gifted students focuses on developing cognitive learning, research and reference, and metacognitive skills at each grade grouping, using principles of differentiated instruction and curricula (GADOE, 2020).

Gifted in-field endorsement—This certification, which consists of three courses, allows educators to identify and teach gifted students of varying cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds within the teacher’s primary field (GAPSC, 2021).

Gifted students (Georgia definition)—Students who demonstrate a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability (ies), exhibit an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and/or excel in specific academic fields, and who need special instruction and/or special ancillary services to achieve at levels commensurate with their abilities (GADOE, 2020).

Gifted students (national definition)—Students who perform, or who have the capability to perform, at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential (NAGC, 2019).

Lived experience(s)—A lived experience is one that is lived through before one takes a reflective view of it (van Manen, 2016).

Local Board of Education (LBOE)—A LBOE is an agency charged with adopting policies to govern education entities within the local educational agency (GADOE, 2020).

Local Educational Agency (LEA)—The local school system pursuant to LBOE control and management (GADOE, 2020).

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)—The national organization whose mission is to empower all who support children with advanced abilities in accessing equitable opportunities that develop their gifts and talent through advocacy, outreach, education, and research (NAGC, 2019).

Underachievement—A term used to describe the discrepancy between a student’s performance and his or her potential or ability to perform at a much higher level (NAGC, 2019).

I will refer to these terms throughout the remaining chapters, providing a context for the reader and hopefully strengthening his or her understanding of the world of gifted education.

Chapter Summary

In the previous sections, I contextualized the work I did in the overall state of gifted programs in Georgia. I provided the personal background for this study, stated the problem that led to the study, and discussed the study’s significance. I then shared the research questions and research goals at the heart of the study, and summarized the methodology I used to craft the study. Finally, I provided a list of terms and definitions that would help a reader unfamiliar with gifted education gain background knowledge essential to understanding my study. In the next chapter, I will describe the conceptual

framework I constructed to guide my work, along with the related theory and research pertinent to the study.

Chapter II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter focuses on the conceptual and theoretical frameworks described by researchers such as Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017). I begin the discussion of my conceptual framework with an explanation of personal experiences that influenced my research plans from the very beginning. I end the discussion with reflections on the pilot interviews I conducted. In between, I discuss theory, research, and literature I absorbed between the early experiences and the pilot interviews, thereby allowing the chapter to mimic my research journey.

Understanding a Conceptual Framework

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) defined a conceptual framework as “an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 5). It is a way to connect all of the components of the research process, including the researcher’s own interests, assumptions, and goals, along with beliefs and theories regarding the subject (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Due to the combination of all of these pieces, a researcher cannot simply find a premade conceptual framework that will work for the current study. Each researcher and each study is unique, so it is up to the researcher to construct the framework for his or her own study (Maxwell, 2013).

According to Maxwell (2013), there are four main components used to construct a conceptual framework: (1) the researcher’s experiential knowledge, (2) existing theory

and research, (3) pilot and exploratory research, and (4) thought experiments. I followed Maxwell's framework in developing my initial conceptual framework, which went through several iterations, mainly due to researcher memoing and self-reflection. I also created a visual representation in the form of an early concept map that helped me sketch out ideas and their relationships. I discuss my experiential knowledge, the idea of subjectivity, and the existing related theory and research in the sections that follow.

Experiential Knowledge

According to Maxwell (2013), experiential knowledge is “what you bring to the research from your own background and identity” (p. 44). The author stated that when a researcher tries to separate his or her life from the research, he or she runs the risk of losing “a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks” (p. 45). But how is a researcher to know when there is too much experiential knowledge incorporated into a study? Maxwell suggested the use of a researcher identity memo as a way for the researcher to reflect upon the research goals, explore any assumptions, and determine what experiential knowledge already exists. In my first qualitative research course with Dr. Richard Schmertzing, I created my own researcher identity memo in an attempt to sort out my own knowledge of the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education, returning to the memo almost a year later during the advanced qualitative course in order to add new experiences I gained as I moved away from gifted teacher to gifted coordinator.

Teaching. This study reflects an interest area that grew from both personal and professional experiences. As a teacher of gifted and talented students in a rural Georgia public middle school for several years, I saw firsthand the underrepresentation of

culturally diverse students within my own classroom. In any given year, my total student population of approximately 80-85 gifted students would only include two or maybe three gifted Black students. I often wondered why there were not more Black students in my classes, as that group comprised approximately 40% of the school's population, which prompted a developing interest in the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs. I was certain there were more academically and creatively gifted Black students, such as my own Adrian, within our school, and this led to a desire to work toward equity and desegregation within the gifted education program.

For most of my teaching career, my general education classes' demographics were very similar to the overall school's demographics. In the early 2000s, White students comprised approximately 60-65% of the school's population, while Black students comprised approximately 40% and Hispanic students comprised less than 1%. These percentages closely mirrored those of my classes, although there were several years where I taught no Hispanic students at all. This 60%-40% split of White and Black students was familiar to me, and I was able to grow as a teacher through working with the regular education students.

In 2010, I became the middle school's gifted English teacher. This meant that I would teach four classes during the day: two classes of gifted seventh graders, and two classes of gifted eighth graders. As it was always a dream of mine to work with gifted children, I was beyond excited when I moved into my new classroom and prepared to work with these advanced learners, anxiously awaiting a copy of my class rosters. As in years past, I planned on using the prior year's yearbook to help me put faces with the

names of my new students. I loved surprising the students when I could call them by name on the first day of school!

When I received my class rosters, I took out the 2009-2010 yearbook and started hunting. I always liked to surprise students by matching their names to their faces on the first day of school! As I finished my hunt, I suddenly realized that my two gifted seventh grade classes were not going to look quite like my previous classes. Out of 45 gifted seventh graders, one was Black. Just one. The other 44 students were White. Thinking this would be an anomaly, I began looking for my eighth-grade students. Again, out of approximately 50 students, only one was Black, only one was Hispanic, and the rest of the students were White. I was certain this was some kind of mistake, so I called my gifted predecessor and asked if she had experienced the same thing. To my surprise, she said, “In my 20 years of teaching gifted students, I don’t remember teaching more than 10 or 12 Black students.” I was floored. How was this possible? It was then, 13 years ago, when my passion for my dissertation topic began to blossom, and it has only grown with time. This passion leads into my subjectivity, which is described in the following section.

Subjectivity. One criticism of qualitative research is that it is rife with subjectivity (Peshkin, 1988), but as Maxwell (2013) explained, “Separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks” (p. 45). Due to the value one’s subjectivity can bring to a study, Peshkin argued that the researcher must be mindful of his or her subjectivity, resulting in the idea of the *subjective I*. Peshkin used the *subjective I* to refer to the aspects of a researcher’s identity that could cloud his or her lens during a research study. One such

subjectivity I see in myself is the *Fair Isn't Always Equal I*. I am a firm believer that each and every student is an individual and should therefore be treated as such as much as possible. In my roles as instructional coach and now curriculum director, I worked with several teachers who believed being fair equated to being equal, meaning they ignored race, culture, and gender within their classrooms.

Another *subjective I* that I identified within myself is the *Teacher of Gifted Students I*. As an advocate for gifted students, I feared becoming upset or even angry when a participant described a negative experience within the gifted program. While this background added to the knowledge I brought to the study, I remained mindful of it and kept it in check so as to not impose my beliefs and values so much that my research became muddled and one-sided. I used memos to help me reflect on my identity as researcher (Maxwell, 2013) to avoid this pitfall. Once I created a draft literature review and reflected on my experiential knowledge, I was ready to develop my conceptual framework even further through the use of a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

In reading the literature on the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education programs, I noticed critical race theory was used as the theoretical framework for much of the research on this topic. Critical race theory (CRT), a theoretical framework for “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 3), and which places race front and center, first appeared in the 1970s as law professor Derrick Bell searched for new ways to combat the more subtle forms of societal racism that were bubbling up across the country (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Building on both critical legal studies and radical feminism, critical

race scholars follow five core tenets of CRT as listed by DeCuir and Dixson (2004): (a) counter-storytelling, (b) permanence of racism, (c) Whiteness as property, (d) interest convergence, and (e) the critique of liberalism, including colorblindness. Each of these tenets is described in detail in the following paragraphs.

Counter-storytelling, as defined by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), is “Writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 171). Counterstories provide an outlet for marginalized groups to use their voices to tell their own stories and help others understand what life as a marginalized person is like (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). I chose to use counterstories for this study because, after reading research article after research article detailing how difficult it is for Black students to remain in gifted education, I wanted to find Black gifted students who did not adhere to the status quo and were actually successful in a gifted program. I, as a White woman, wanted to “know and understand” (Lewis Ellison & Solomon, 2019, p. 224) what it was like for my participants to experience varying levels of success while participating in gifted education. Were their experiences as negative as some of the research I read had shown? Did their experiences match what I considered to be an all-inclusive and positive educational program? My participants’ counterstories certainly opened my eyes to the racism inherent within this educational program that I have championed for years.

DeCuir and Dixson’s (2004) second tenet of CRT is the permanence, or centrality, of racism. This tenet suggests that, “racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27) as well as educational settings, allowing for the “privileging of Whites and the subsequent Othering of people of

color” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). DeCuir-Gunby (2020) further articulated this tenet by adding the idea that racism is integrated in and has substantial influence within all social structures. This tenet played out a few times during my study. For example, Letitia described a time when a White student in her gifted math class took her pencil off her desk and threw it at her, hitting her on the head. When Letitia went to pick her pencil up off the floor, the teacher reprimanded Letitia for leaving her seat without permission. Letitia promptly told the teacher in no uncertain terms that the incident was not her fault, but she still received detention as a consequence of her “misbehavior.” Letitia believed that if either the student or her teacher had been Black, the situation would have been different. It was obvious to her who was high on the totem pole (the White student) and who was not (herself). When Letitia shared this experience with me, I thought back to my classroom teacher days and wondered how many times my actions showed that White students had more privilege in my class than other students did. I wish I could say that never happened, but then I’d be lying to myself.

The third of DeCuir and Dixson’s (2004) tenets of CRT, Whiteness as property, is defined as the “notion that [W]hiteness itself has value for its possessor and conveys a host of privileges and benefits” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 186). When this tenet is applied to education, it illuminates the inequity experienced between White and non-White students. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), access to high-quality and rigorous curriculum has been almost exclusively enjoyed by White students because of the idea that “those with ‘better’ property are entitled to ‘better’ schools” (pp. 53-54). Tracking of students, whether in a vocational-focused curriculum or a gifted and Advanced Placement-focused curriculum, usually benefits White students and contributes

to the re-segregation of schools (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). While there are some Black students who have knocked down barriers to highly-rigorous educational opportunities, such students are few and far between. The difficulty I encountered while recruiting participants for this study, which I have discussed in-depth in Chapter 3, was a prime example of the Whiteness as property tenet. Out of the previous 5 graduating classes from Liberty Valley High School, there were only 13 Black students who had been officially identified as gifted. Thirteen Black students out of a collective total of 1,851 students were identified as gifted while 123 White students received the same identification, illustrating that the school's White students made up the majority of students receiving higher-level instruction.

In 1980, Derrick Bell, who believed that the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling was more about “the self-interest of elite [W]hites than a desire to help [B]lacks” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 9), developed the principle he called *interest convergence*. With this principle, Bell (1980) posited that “the interest of [B]lacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of [W]hites” (p. 523). Interest convergence, then, is not about altruism on the part of the elite majority; it is about how the majority can benefit from so-called racial justice towards the minority. When several of my participants talked about the change from strictly-gifted classes to high-achieving classes during middle school, they shared how nice it was to no longer be the only Black student in advanced classes. I believe that while this more inclusive educational environment was developed to provide greater access to more rigorous content for more students, it also allowed the school system's leaders, all of whom were White, to promote the school system's gifted program as more

diverse and inclusive than surrounding school systems' programs. When the accolades began rolling in, I saw that it was those White district leaders who were applauded, not the culturally-diverse students who were participating in the program. Not only did more Black students participate in this rigorous program, but more White students were also placed in these classes, benefitting the White majority, too, bringing Bell's (1980) idea of interest convergence to life.

The final tenet of CRT posited by DeCuir and Dixson (2004) is the critique of liberalism, including colorblindness. According to the authors, "CRT scholars are critical of three basic notions that have been embraced by liberal legal ideology: the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and incremental change" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29). Due to the purposes of this study, I have chosen to focus on the utopian idea of colorblindness, which is defined as the "belief that one should treat all persons equally, without regard to their race" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 170). A colorblind mentality is illustrated by a White voter claiming to be colorblind because she voted for former President Barrack Obama, or when a White teacher claims to be colorblind because he treats all of his students the same, regardless of race. These statements, which, in essence, sound good and fair, actually "deny or dismiss the existence of individual or structural racism" (Mayfield, 2021, p. 33), and minimize racism while absolving the White majority from the nation's sordid history of White supremacy. Listening to Letitia, one of my participants, talk about "never learning about or reading a lot of Black poets or authors" made me realize that her White English teachers probably considered themselves colorblind when it came to their instruction. However, without truly realizing the needs of the few Black students in those gifted classes, being colorblind meant not focusing on

culturally-diverse authors or poets while irresponsibly perpetuating the privilege of White writers throughout history.

According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004), CRT also employs activism as a feature of theory, presenting CRT scholars with the goal of bringing about change and social justice for marginalized populations, making the CRT framework the appropriate framework for this study. Parker and Lynn (2016) contended that “linking CRT to education can indeed foster the connections of theory to practice and activism on issues related to race” (p. 150), further solidifying my choice of CRT as my theoretical framework for this study, as I hope to become a change agent within my own school system and encourage others to do the same.

Although CRT began in the legal world, it did not stay there. Within the past 2 decades, CRT expanded from legal studies to other social sciences, including education, and covered issues such as hierarchy in schools, tracking, school discipline, high-stakes testing, and multicultural education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Howard, 2019). With the goal of “theoriz[ing] race and us[ing] it as an analytic tool for understanding school inequity” (p. 48), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) first applied CRT to education and posited that school inequity in the United States is based on three tenets:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights.
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity. (p. 48)

Ladson-Billings (2016) demonstrated the relationship between CRT and education by using curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation as examples of the impact of race on schooling. From restricted access to engaging curriculum and deficit-based instruction to disparate funding and disingenuous desegregation, Ladson-Billings connected various components of education to the maintenance of “a White supremacist master script” (2016, p. 24). Donnor (2019) stated that while it is important for critical race scholars to “articulate the continuity of White racism in education through voice, counter-storytelling, and counter-narrative” (p. 20) that is not enough. He posited CRT scholars should also consider and explain the denial of White privilege and supremacy in educational settings so they can move past simply telling stories and towards engaging more social principles and prompting more social change. Because a goal of my research was to remove as many barriers as possible to gifted education for Black students, CRT was a perfect theoretical framework in which to complete my research. According to Taylor (2016), “CRT scholars believe that racial analysis can be used to deepen understanding of the educational barriers for people of color, as well as exploring how these barriers are resisted and overcome” (p. 8), which is exactly what I hoped my research would accomplish.

Existing Theory and Research

Throughout the literature on the underrepresentation of students of color in gifted education, four main interest points emerged. First, researchers found multiple causes of the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education, including inequitable referral and eligibility processes (Allen, 2017; Card & Giuliano, 2016; Cohen, 2022; Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017; Ford, 2010; Peters, 2022; Siegle et al., 2016), student

social-emotional concerns (Ford, 2010; Frye & Vogt, 2010; Grantham & Biddle, 2014; Siegle et al., 2016; Whiting, 2009), and the oft-mentioned achievement gap (Frye & Vogt, 2010; Siegle et al., 2016). A second point of interest was racial identity and its connection to academic success. Authors such as Ford (2012), Grantham and Biddle (2014), and Whiting (2009) stressed the need for gifted Black students to develop a healthy racial identity related to academics to be successful in gifted education programs. Underachievement, a third interest point found in the literature, was often linked to both students' underdeveloped racial identity and their failure to remain in gifted programs (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993; Frye & Vogt, 2010; Hopkins & Garrett, 2010; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, Quek, & Struck, 2004). Finally, researchers found teacher perceptions of gifted students, including deficit thinking, (Ford, 2012; Ford, 2014a; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Whiting, 2009) and lack of culturally-responsive pedagogy training (Ford, 2010; Ford, 2012; Ford, 2014a; Grantham & Biddle, 2014; Siegle et al., 2016) to hinder students' access to and success in gifted programs.

Student factors of underrepresentation. To better understand the inequitable enrollment issue facing gifted Black students, it is important to be aware of the myriad causes of their underrepresentation in gifted education programs. In this section, I will discuss the literature related to the various causes of Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education. While authors such as Allen (2017) and Warne et al. (2013) blamed a single factor for underrepresentation, others such as Ford (2010) and Frye and Vogt (2010) believed a combination of factors was the cause. One cause of gifted Black students' underrepresentation authors described was the overall gifted referral and eligibility process. Many states rely on standardized testing, both for aptitude and

achievement, to make gifted determinations, yet Allen (2017), in her qualitative study of six gifted teachers, found that all six participants believed the general overuse of standardized test scores in the gifted eligibility process to be a significant barrier for culturally- and linguistically-diverse students seeking gifted identification. In fact, Kendi (2019) stated that, “The use of standardized tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies” (p. 101). Plucker and Peters (2017) proposed limited educational opportunities prohibited these students from attaining the scores necessary for gifted identification. Some states used single-measure policies, many focusing on traditional IQ tests, which historically produced lower scores for students of color (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017; Ford, 2010). Plucker and Peters advocated using local or possibly building-level norms instead of national norms with these assessments to more accurately compare students within a population. Researchers such as Ford (2010) deemed several gifted eligibility tests as culturally biased, although test proponents touted these assessments as objective and argued policy, not assessment, changes should be made (Erwin & Worrell, 2012; Frye & Vogt, 2010). Obi et al. (2014) suggested policy changes that included using multiple unbiased identification methods that recognize the various domains of giftedness, such as creativity and leadership. The authors also recommended educators assess students’ nonverbal ability as well as verbal ability, and keep both qualitative and quantitative data in mind when making eligibility decisions.

As teachers are often gatekeepers to gifted education programs for culturally diverse students, it is important to understand the various factors that lead to this barrier. Teacher referrals, a part of many states’ gifted eligibility process, were typically lower

for students of color than White students due to the absence of traits usually considered as gifted (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017, Siegle et al., 2016). In their 2013 study of Utah's state-collected data of 14,781 gifted students, Warne et al. asserted that the under-referral by teachers was due to misunderstanding student cultures and teachers' own implicit beliefs about giftedness. Ford (2013) attributed teacher under-referral to nomination forms containing positive connotations of gifted traits while teachers view the same traits as negative in culturally-diverse students. For example, a teacher may view a Black gifted student as disrespectful or challenging, yet perceive a White gifted student exhibiting the same characteristics as inquisitive or curious. To combat teacher under-referral of students of color, authors such as Lamb, Boedeker, and Kettler (2019) and Card and Giuliano (2016) championed using multiple criteria to determine gifted eligibility. Ford (2013b) advocated student self-nomination for those Black students who see themselves as scholars. Ecker-Lyster and Niileksela (2017) promoted the use of standardized rubrics, and Card and Giuliano (2016) suggested using a universal screener to increase the number of gifted-eligible students of color and to make eligibility procedures more equitable.

Social-emotional concerns presented another substantial obstacle for Black students' participation in gifted education (Ford, 2010). Frye and Vogt (2010) argued that students of color felt a strong need to belong and remain loyal to their same-race peers, which often contradicted the expectations of gifted and talented programs and led to Black gifted students being underrepresented. This idea of *fictive kinship*, a familial-type connection between societal members with reciprocal relationships, was important to Black students and contributed to their resistance to school success (Fordham, 1988). In a

similar vein, gifted Black students often feared being accused of *acting White*, typically defined as being smart, using standard English, earning high grades, and participating in mostly-White academic programs (Ford & Trotman Scott, 2010). Ford and Trotman Scott asserted this fear contributed to lower participation of Black students in gifted programs, eventually leading to their removal from the program.

To better understand the segregation that exists within gifted education programs, it is important to be aware of the excellence gap that occurs between culturally diverse gifted students and White gifted students. When discussing traditional *achievement gaps*, which are the differences between subgroups based on academic achievement, educators and researchers focused on students meeting minimal competency requirements and traditionally ignored gifted and talented learners (Plucker & Peters, 2017). Plucker and Peters used the term *excellence gap* to refer to the differences among subgroups of high-achieving students and argued that these gaps begin prior to students' formal education. The authors attributed pre-school excellence gaps to varied amounts of text exposure, parental read-alouds, and vocabulary exposure. Peters (2022) urged educators to consider that the disproportionality in gifted education could be "due to some children not having had the opportunity to develop their talents" (p. 83). Ford (2012) blamed what she considered racially-segregated gifted programs for the continued excellence gap, and Erwin and Worrell (2012) attributed this inequity to the continued overall minimum-competency achievement gap between White and Black students. Plucker and Peters (2017) hypothesized that without deliberate consideration, the excellence gap will continue to grow. They suggested a path of targeted interventions early in a student's school career to address the excellence gap: realistic opportunities; universal testing and

local norms; ability grouping; an improved K-12 accountability system including adaptive testing; educator preparation; and post-secondary psychosocial interventions. However, Erwin and Worrell stated that inequitable representation of Black students in gifted education cannot change until the overall achievement gap is abolished.

Social-emotional factors. For gifted Black students, there are more factors involved in their educational success than simply academic ones. Social-emotional factors such as racial identity, scholar identity, and the fear of acting White play a role in these students' success and retention in gifted education programs.

Racial identity. To better understand the social-emotional issues gifted Black students face, it is necessary to be aware of the role racial identity plays in their overall academic development. Researchers such as Ford and Trotman Scott (2010) and Grantham and Ford (2003) discussed the importance of racial identity theory when considering the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs. Racial identity theory consisted of eight identity types and referred to how much a person of color believed he or she had in common with others of the same race (Ford & Trotman Scott, 2010; Kohatsu et al., 2000). For example, Ogbu (2004) found some Black students afraid of losing their Black English identity through the use of proper English, thus alienating them from their peers. Ford et al. (1993) believed this fear of no longer being considered recognized members of the Black community led gifted Black students to intentionally sabotage their own academic success. In their 2019 phenomenological study of five high achieving, low-income Black students, Tabron and Venzant Chambers reported one participant stated, "some students of color might feel like they would lose themselves or become disconnected from their cultural community if they took certain classes" (p. 132)

and used this response to support the relationship between academic achievement and students' racial identity. The authors argued that Black students should not abandon their racial identity to succeed academically, a process Fordham (1988) referred to as adopting a raceless identity, and encouraged educators to support these students by creating a culturally-aware school environment. Based on data collected on 629 Black K-12 students, Harris and Marsh (2010) suggested that when Black students possessed a strong racial identity, the students performed better academically, confirming what Tabron and Venzant Chambers (2019) discussed as the need for supportive school environments. However, in their 2002 study of 38 relatively high-achieving Black and Hispanic high school students, Bergin and Cooks (2002) reported very few academically-successful participants felt a loss of racial identity while pursuing high academic achievement. The authors posited the raceless identity phenomenon may only occur under certain circumstances and needed further research.

Scholar identity. In addition to gifted Black students' racial identity, developing a strong scholar identity could also lead to more equitable enrollment of these students in gifted programs. Therefore, I believe it is imperative that educators understand the concept of scholar identity and how to help culturally diverse gifted students develop a strong one. During his extensive review of the literature, Whiting (2009) observed that academically successful Black males shared specific characteristics and thus proposed the *scholar identity model* to help address all gifted Black students' underrepresentation in advanced programs. He found several characteristics of students possessing a strong scholar identity: self-efficacy; willingness to make sacrifices; internal locus of control; focus on the future; self-awareness; need for achievement; academic self-confidence; and

strong racial identity. Whiting argued for proactive educators empowering Black students to persevere through challenges to their scholar identity. Along with Whiting, Ford (2012) also advocated promoting a strong scholar identity in students of color to rectify this underrepresentation issue.

Acting White. A third social-emotional concern for gifted Black students that must be explored is the acting White phenomenon. To better understand the relationship between racial and social identities and gifted Black students' recruitment and enrollment in gifted education programs, it is important to acknowledge this form of bullying. Another racial identity concern researchers studied was the acting White accusation. Often referred to as a burden, Fordham and Ogbu (1986), in their ethnographic study of 33 academically-able Black students, found students associated acting White with characteristics such as studying, striving for and obtaining good grades, and speaking standard English as opposed to Black colloquial English. Referencing existing literature, Grantham and Biddle (2014) reported on the bullying nature of the acting White phenomenon. When Black students exhibited characteristics including intelligence, motivation, earning high grades, and taking rigorous classes, their Black peers derogatorily accused them of acting White, thus hindering gifted Black students' success in advanced classes (Grantham & Biddle, 2014). Black students' non-gifted peers considered educational institutions such as libraries, bookstores, and museums as uncool, reducing the likelihood of gifted Black students visiting these institutions for fear of acting uncool and, therefore, acting White (Whiting, 2009). Grantham and Biddle implored educators to become upstanders for these gifted students and to work to reduce this type of bullying and negative peer pressure.

Underachievement of Black gifted and talented students. Once gifted Black students overcome the barriers to gifted identification, they then face another obstacle: sustaining their participation and academic success in gifted programs (Frye & Vogt, 2010). In a 2008 descriptive and exploratory study of 166 Black gifted middle and high school students, Ford et al. reported 28% of participants answered no when asked if they tried their best in school, and 69% said they did not study or complete any homework on the weekend. These data are important because they underscore gifted Black students' need for support and encouragement to persevere and actively participate in gifted education programs. In a study that used the grounded theory approach and a critical race theory framework, Henfield, Moore, and Wood (2008) recounted half of their study's 12 participants listed being academically disengaged as a response to their gifted environments. VanTassel-Baska et al. (2004), through their surveys of 68 district gifted coordinators, 214 gifted teachers, and 136 gifted students, found lack of motivation and persistence to be a prominent issue with Black gifted students. Ford (2013) observed that when Black gifted students associated school success with the White culture, they intentionally reduced their academic effort. According to Obi et al. (2014), when students did not possess a strong pride in their culture, they were less likely to resist the pressure to underachieve. Related to cultural pride, deficit thinking, which occurs "when educators hold negative, stereotypic, and counterproductive views about culturally diverse students and lower their expectations of these students accordingly" (Ford & Grantham, 2003, p. 217), can also lead to underachievement of gifted Black students in more challenging academic settings. Kendi (2019) described his experience with deficit thinking:

I thought I was a subpar student and was bombarded by messages—from Black people, White people, the media—that told me that the reason was rooted in my race . . . which made me more discouraged and less motivated as a student . . . which only further reinforced for me the racist idea that Black people just weren't very studious. (p. 6)

Whatever the cause, underachievement made retention of gifted Black students in rigorous programs much less likely, adding to the underrepresentation problem (Ford, 2013). Ford emphasized supporting gifted underachievers as an equitable goal rather than removing them from gifted programs, leading to ways educators can be upstanders for gifted Black students by advocating for the “identification and development of creative potential” (Grantham, 2003, p. 519). In the following section, I turned my focus from gifted Black students to gifted education teachers' roles in the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education programs.

Teacher role in underrepresentation. Whether intentional or not, teachers are often an obstacle for gifted Black students in both recruitment into and retention within a gifted education program. Peters (2022) stated that “Too often, students are missed [in gifted identification] not because they would not benefit from a gifted service, but rather because they were never considered in the first place” (p. 89). Educators typically possess a specific perception of gifted students that neglects the characteristics of non-traditional gifted students. This super-focused perception could be due in part to a lack of understanding of culturally-responsive pedagogy. Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Frazier Trotman (2002) found that when educators lack culturally-responsive pedagogy, they are

more likely to possess a deficit perspective, which keeps them from recognizing the gifts and talents of Black students.

Teacher perceptions. Assessments are not the only obstacle culturally-diverse gifted students must overcome. Teacher perceptions also present a significant barrier to gifted education programs for culturally-diverse students. In Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman's (2002) assessment of 200 schools, the authors found culturally-diverse students are persistently underrepresented in gifted education because teachers and other educational decision makers do not acknowledge, understand, and affirm cultural differences among students, bringing deficit thinking into the recruitment and retention of gifted Black students in gifted education programs. I believe it is important to understand how important a teacher's role as referral agent can be in the inclusion or exclusion of Black students in gifted education. Teacher perceptions of gifted students and a lack of awareness and practice of culturally-responsive pedagogy and curriculum also caused underrepresentation of students of color in gifted education. Through their surveys of 214 gifted teachers, VanTassel-Baska et al. (2004) found that when a teacher did not view a student as possibly gifted due to his or her own perceptions or implicit bias regarding students of color, the teacher was much less likely to refer that student for gifted services.

When Hopkins and Garrett (2010) used 12 research studies to study the idea of underrepresentation in gifted education, they noted low expectations of culturally diverse students created teacher bias and negatively impacted teacher nominations for gifted services in all 12 studies they read. Citing research on teachers' lack of correctly identifying gifted children of color, Ford (2013) described the teacher perception of an ideal gifted child as a cooperative, well-mannered, motivated, teacher-pleasing high

achiever, a description the author attributed to White students. For example, when teachers envisioned all gifted students as highly-motivated high achievers, they often overlooked gifted students who do not meet this ideal and therefore under-referred those students for gifted eligibility (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2004). Based on their study of 12 research articles published between 2002 and 2008, Hopkins and Garrett (2010) presented the teacher perception that gifted children present no behavioral problems in the classroom as inaccurate. Trotman Scott's (2014) literature study of 17 scholarly articles written between 1993 and 2013 offered cognitive boredom as an explanation of student misbehavior due to disinterest in even the most gifted students. I believe these teacher prejudices, both positive and negative, continue to restrict Black students' access to gifted services, denying them the challenging education they need. Further, I believe that culturally-responsive pedagogy, which I discussed in the next section, could help improve the issue of Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education programs.

Culturally-responsive pedagogy (CRP). CRP is a pedagogical framework that “embraces the cultural backgrounds of students with the understanding that utilizing diverse experiences in the classroom allows differences to be seen through an opportunity lens, not through a deficit lens” (Murff, 2020, p. 2). This pedagogical approach, which involves administrators and teachers analyzing deficit-based structures within schools, is the antithesis of a colorblind, or one-size-fits-all, approach to education. To better understand the need for culturally-responsive pedagogy, one must look at the racial discrepancy between students and teachers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), during the 2015-2016 school year, 80% of the nation's public elementary and secondary teachers were White, 13% were other minority

racism, and 7% were Black. During the same year, the student population was 49% White, 36% other minority races, and 15% Black (NCES, 2019). While many teachers profess to be colorblind when it comes to their students, Ladson-Billings (2021) believed that color blindness is a “romantic notion taken up by social conservatives in an effort to increase the likelihood that disenfranchised people of color will suffer further social marginalization and alienation from society” (pp. 227-228). Teachers may have the best intentions when claiming they are colorblind or culture-blind (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2004), but Ladson-Billings (2021) stated that the idea of color-blindness can only work in a colorblind structure, which, she claimed, the United States is not.

Cultural responsiveness could help teachers overcome these obstacles. Hammond (2015) defined *cultural responsiveness* as “an educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content” (p. 15). According to Samuels (2018), when the teachers she interviewed for her study applied the concept of cultural responsiveness to their teaching, they found it easier to build teacher-student relationships, create a positive and trusting classroom culture, and engage students in the learning. Samuels’ qualitative study of 200 teachers working in low socioeconomic schools in the American southeast showed how beneficial culturally responsive teaching could be, stating, “Participants spoke extensively about how cultural responsiveness has the potential to positively influence classroom culture, foster positive relationships, and build a solid relationship of trust” (Samuels, 2018, pp. 24-25). These components,

according to Samuels' participants, could create a classroom environment where students felt seen and heard, increasing students' confidence and their sense of safety.

Another possible benefit of cultural responsiveness in the classroom could be increased retention of Black students in gifted education programs. In their comprehensive literature review of over 50 research studies, Obi et al. (2014) determined that gifted students of color may not be willing to remain in a gifted and talented program when the instruction they receive is not culturally-sensitive. Therefore, school systems should ensure teachers receive meaningful, on-going professional learning regarding culturally-responsive teaching practices to help change their fixed mindsets (Ford, 2014a). Obi et al. (2014) believed teachers should become aware of their beliefs about their own culture first before attempting to appreciate others' cultures so they can better "provide an unbiased, inclusive and sensitive education to all gifted learners" (p. 85). Teachers' deliberate use of gifted-specific culturally responsive strategies, interventions, and curriculum could help eliminate gifted eligibility barriers, make eligibility more equitable, reduce the excellence gap, and engage and motivate gifted students of color as they see more of themselves in gifted programs (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2017; Ford, 2010; Ford, 2014a; Ford, et al., 2008; Obi et al., 2014).

In this section, I reviewed the existing research relevant to my study. While there were a multitude of research studies, meta-analyses, and opinion pieces on the topic of Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education programs, I was selective when choosing pieces to include in my literature review. I followed Maxwell's (2013) advice to "critically examine each idea or research finding" (p. 41), selecting research that supported, validated, or even contradicted literature written by the gurus of equity in

education, including Donna Ford, Tarek Grantham, Scott Peters, and Gilman Whiting. Not only did the existing research validate my assertion that the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education is a concern, but it also guided me to the questions I wanted to ask and the experiences about which I wanted to learn from my participants, which, in turn, helped me create my interview guide. Along with the literature review, pilot interviews were also an important piece of a study's conceptual framework (Maxwell, 2013). In the following section, I described the general purpose of pilot interviews along with the two pilot interviews I conducted prior to interviewing my study participants.

Pilot Interviews

In his discussion of conceptual frameworks, Maxwell (2013) urged researchers to pilot-test their interview guides with people as similar to the researchers' intended participants as possible. These pilot interviews, Maxwell stated, would help the researcher "determine if the questions work as intended" (p. 101) and what revisions, if any, the researcher may need to make. Because I am an introvert by nature, and because I was unsure as to how strong my interview questions were, I decided to take Maxwell's advice and complete some pilot interviews. In spring 2019, I conducted two pilot interviews as part of an assignment for my qualitative research course. I interviewed a Hispanic Spanish teacher who taught gifted and talented seventh graders for 4 years in an attempt to understand the underrepresentation of diverse students in gifted programs through the eyes of an underrepresented teacher. For my second pilot interview, I reached out to one of my former Black gifted students to learn about her experiences as

she navigated a gifted education program as a Black student. I will describe these interviews in the next two sub-sections.

Pilot Interview One: Spring 2019. In the very early stages of my research, I planned on interviewing not only gifted Black students but teachers of gifted students, as well. I wanted to see the world of gifted education through the eyes of a teacher not immersed in the literature of underrepresented students as I had been for almost a year. Because my research was focused on underrepresented students, I decided to interview an underrepresented teacher, too. As I looked through the list of gifted education teachers in my district, I was disheartened to learn that there was only one non-White teacher of gifted students in the entire school system. Señora Garcia (pseudonym) taught Spanish IB, the second half of the Spanish I course, to seventh grade gifted and talented students. At the time of the interview, Señora Garcia was in the 4th year of teaching this course. I sent her an email along with a short description of the study, and we scheduled a 90-minute interview for an upcoming teacher workday.

With both my audio recorder and an interview guide in hand, I met Señora Garcia in her classroom. I read the Valdosta State University research statement for recorded interviews to her, reassured her that the interview was entirely voluntary, and asked if she had any questions. Señora Garcia shook her head, and I began the interview. While I used my interview guide to help me stay on track with my questioning, we occasionally veered away from my prepared questions, letting the conversation go where Señora Garcia's responses took it. She discussed her path to becoming a teacher of gifted students, her perceptions of gifted students as a whole and as individuals, and her opportunities to work with gifted children from different racial backgrounds. Señora Garcia took some

time before she answered each question, resulting in thorough answers and descriptive experiences. Before I knew it, our time was up. I thanked Señora Garcia for her participation and asked her to contact me with any questions or thoughts that arose after we finished.

Immediately after the conclusion of the pilot interview, I went to the school's media center so I could memo while the interview was still fresh in my mind. Sitting at a table in the biography section, I played back the audio recording and easily filled a page with my thoughts on both the content and the mechanics of the interview. Right away, I determined that I fell prey to what Seidman (2013) called, "The hardest work for many interviewers" (p. 81), which was staying quiet while the participant talked. It was difficult for me to stay quiet while Señora Garcia was talking because I found myself wanting to add my own experiences of teaching gifted students. I realized that I was not actively listening during much of the interview. Instead, I was thinking about how I would respond to Señora Garcia's statements. I knew that I must "quash [my] normal instinct to talk" (Seidman, 2013, p. 82) during my official participant interviews if I wanted to get the participant's raw, true lived experiences without any influence from me.

As this was my first experience with interviewing for a research study, I chose to use TranscribeMe, an online human transcription service recommended by a colleague. I uploaded my audio file to my TranscribeMe account, and within 24 hours, I received an editable Microsoft Word transcription of Señora Garcia's interview. This allowed me to manipulate and chunk pieces of the interview, making analysis of the data easier. I was able to add nonverbal cues I noted during the interview to the transcription's text. Using a transcription service also showed me how to go from an audio recording to a document

that could be used as data. Having never transcribed before, I was thankful for an example of a transcription as well as the audio recording it belonged to. This process helped me see the connection of audio to print, and it was quite beneficial.

Pilot Interview Two: Spring 2019. For my second pilot interview, I wanted a participant who would more closely resemble a participant in my upcoming study. Ta'kaya (pseudonym) was a former student who participated in a gifted program during her K-12 public education career. While Ta'kaya met most of my criteria for the study's participants, she did not meet the graduation criteria, having graduated from high school 7 years prior to the study. Therefore, I knew she would be as close to an official study participant as I could get. Ta'kaya and I maintained communication with each other through Facebook, so I sent her a direct message, asking her to call me about my upcoming research study. The next day, Ta'kaya and I spoke over the phone, reminiscing about her time in my English class and about where her classmates are now, before turning to the subject of the pilot interview. She was aware of my research study from our previous Facebook conversations, and she was happy to participate in a pilot interview.

Ta'kaya and I met at a local coffee shop on a cold Saturday in late March. We greeted each other with a hug, having not seen each other in person for several years. Coffees in hand, we settled into a corner booth and caught up on each other's lives for a bit before getting down to the interview. Once again, I read aloud the Valdosta State University research statement for recorded interviews, made sure she understood that the interview was entirely voluntary, and asked if she had any questions. Ta'kaya did not have any questions for me, so I started the audio recording and began the interview, following the questions on my interview guide.

Before the interview began, I set the intention of actively listening to Ta'kaya. I would not interrupt her discussion, but would instead take notes on topics I felt needed more elaboration. Actively listening to Ta'kaya's experiences was actually easier than I thought it would be. While there were several times when I wanted to explore a topic in more depth, I simply made a notation on my interview guide and revisited the idea when Ta'kaya was finished talking, and it was appropriate to do so. She discussed her childhood, her earliest school memory, and her first realization that she was possibly gifted. I promised Ta'kaya that the interview would take no more than 90 minutes of her time since she would work a shift at a local restaurant later that day, but as the 90-minute mark got closer, I realized there was so much more I wanted to learn from her. I knew that my official participant interviews would follow Seidman's (2013) three-interview series, but this pilot interview was a one-and-done session. Therefore, I made sure to incorporate questions representing the purpose of each of the three interviews into this one conversation. Ta'kaya discussed her early experiences with family and school, the details of her lived experiences with gifted education, and a reflection on the meaning of her experiences. When the interview was finished, I found myself wishing for two more interviews with her!

For Ta'kaya's interview, I decided to transcribe the recording myself. Although Seidman (2013) suggested it ideal to hire a transcriber, I wanted to become intimately familiar with Ta'kaya's responses and with the flow of questions and answers throughout the entire interview. I used the format of my first pilot interview's transcription from a transcribing service as a guide for transcribing my second interview. Transcription took me a total of 3.5 hours. I would listen to the question asked, pause the recording to type

the question, then listen to Ta'kaya's answer before pausing the recording again to type her response. More than once I replayed her responses to ensure I was capturing her words with my text. Once the transcription was complete, I shared it with Ta'kaya via email, asking her to please read through the document to make sure I captured her experiences correctly. I also asked her to share any comments or concerns regarding the questions from my interview guide. She assured me that the transcription was correct and that she thought the questions were strong prompts that did not guide the participant to answer in one way or another. I took her feedback as positive, and I finally felt ready to interview my study participants for real.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I defined the term conceptual framework and elaborated on three of Maxwell's (2013) four main components of a conceptual framework: (1) the researcher's experiential knowledge, (2) existing theory and research, and (3) pilot and exploratory research. Regarding my experiential knowledge, I shared the impact that being a former teacher of gifted students and current gifted director had on my study. For the past 13 years, I have seen firsthand truly how underrepresented culturally-diverse students, including Black students, are in gifted education. My experience with gifted education forced me to analyze my own subjectivities, including the *Fair Isn't Always Equal* subjective I and the *Teacher of Gifted Students* subjective I. When I began researching the topic of Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education programs, I was frankly overwhelmed with the number of articles, research studies, and entire books dedicated to this issue. During my intense study of the literature, I found four main interest points that stood out: (1) multiple causes of underrepresentation, (2)

racial identity and its connection to academic success, (3) student underachievement, and (4) teacher perceptions of gifted students. I was then able to focus on these four points as I scoured the literature, weeding out material that was not pertinent to my study. For the third component of the conceptual framework, pilot and exploratory research, I chose to conduct pilot interviews with two interviewees connected to the topic of my study but not to the specific study itself. These pilot interviews illuminated strengths and weaknesses in my original interview guide, allowing me to make changes before conducting the real interviews with my participants.

I also included a discussion of my theoretical framework, CRT, in this chapter as that framework provided the most appropriate lens for my specific study. In fact, Novak (2022) suggested that “gifted education use CRT as a discourse for transformative change” (p. 128) in order to accomplish a “structural change that is sorely needed” (p. 128). Using CRT as my framework, I was able to look at the research with a more critical eye, instead of a privileged White female educator who once professed to be “colorblind” when it came to teaching culturally-diverse students, thinking that meant I could not possibly be racist. After studying the five core tenets of CRT described in this chapter, it became clear to me that gifted education programs are inherently racist, causing me to deepen my “understanding of the educational barriers for people of color” (Taylor, 2016, p. 8) and allowing me to look at those inherently racist barriers my six study participants faced during their participation in a gifted education program.

According to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), “How you execute a study is a function of how you think about it” (p. 71). The researcher shapes a study’s research questions and methods by his or her engagement with the existing research and theory, two of the

components of a study's conceptual framework. For example, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) used the analogy of the conceptual framework as a path to a researcher's study. Each step along the path, such as making an argument and providing a rationale for the argument, leads the reader to the end of the path, which is the study itself. The researcher must complete each step, or component, of the conceptual framework, fitting the steps together to inform the researcher about what data to collect and how to analyze it. The conceptual framework provides the rationale for the choices made in the methods section of a study. In other words, "the choices you make about what to study are tightly interwoven with those you make about how to study it" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 79). In this chapter, I described each component of my study's conceptual framework, which I used to determine the methodological approach I took. This methodological approach is detailed in the next chapter.

A need for further inquiry into the inequitable enrollment of Black students in gifted education programs remains because, regardless of copious prior research, there continues to be a cycle of underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education. Schools must be challenged to meet all students' needs, including gifted students of color (Obi et al., 2014). Equity-based changes to identification policies and procedures, access to multicultural content and perspectives, and professional learning in culturally-responsive pedagogy can aid in reducing underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education programs (Obi et al., 2014; Whiting, 2009). These students deserve a challenging, culturally-sensitive environment, yet historically have not been given the opportunity (Whiting, 2009). Inequitable access to gifted education not only negatively impacts the students it shuts out, but also the students' families, community, and the

nation (Ford, 2010). These students can grow the nation's economy and keep the country at the forefront of innovation (Plucker & Peters, 2017). A deeper understanding of this issue will afford educators a better understanding of Black gifted students' schooling experiences in hopes of growing the enrollment of students of color in gifted education.

Chapter III

METHODS

In order to provide a thorough account of the research design, data collection, and data analysis processes of this study, this chapter details the steps I took to select the study's setting and participants, to collect and transcribe the data, to reduce and analyze the data, and to present my participants' data. I also describe how I used reflective memoing and knowledge of my subjectivities to strive for a trustworthy and valid study. In this chapter, I included portions of three reflective memos to demonstrate my thought process throughout the study, the first of which follows.

In order to get a better handle on my research proposal/argument, I spent a little over an hour on the phone with Dr. Richard Schmertzling on Friday, April 12. We started by discussing my idea for a qualitative study (the experiences of underrepresented gifted students in gifted education) and Dr. S asked if I had thought about using portraiture as the design for my study. I became intrigued with portraiture during our first class meeting in January when Dr. S introduced us to Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and her work with portraiture. I liked that this design focuses on the good, so I purchased a copy of Lightfoot's book *The Good High School* that very afternoon. I felt much more confident in my processes at the conclusion of the phone call. (Researcher journal, April 13, 2019)

I chose to conduct a qualitative study for various reasons. Merriam (2002) described qualitative researchers as striving to “*understand the meaning* people have

constructed about their world and their experiences” (p. 4, emphasis in original).

Similarly, Patton (2015) discussed “capturing stories to understand people’s perspectives and experiences” (p. 13) as a contribution of qualitative research. Both of my research questions lent themselves to this methodological approach as they all related to the lived experiences of my participants. Also, my theoretical, practical, and personal goals all included gaining insights into the experiences of gifted Black students and understanding the meaning they attached to those experiences.

Research Design

Within the myriad qualitative approaches, I decided to combine Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) portraiture with Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) counter-storytelling, a component of CRT, in order to focus on the good within the stories of those who are usually kept silent. When these approaches are combined, the researcher can “demonstrate a commitment to the research participants and contextualize the depictions of individuals and events” (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005, p. 17) while telling the “stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). The qualitative research method in general and my chosen approaches align with the problem explained previously. According to Creswell (2014), specific approaches are needed for certain types of research problems, and the concept of underrepresentation in the problem I am addressing, along with the specific group under study, fits well with qualitative research.

Portraiture, a qualitative approach developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), “is a method that analyzes facets of a theme through in-depth narratives” (Hampsten, 2015, p. 468) by mixing science and art. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997),

there are five key components of the portraiture approach: context, voice, relationships, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole. To the portraitist, seeing participants' behaviors, perspectives, and talk in contexts such as physical settings and cultural rituals is the only way those characteristics can be interpreted (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The voices of the portraitist and the participants are vital to portraiture, but the participants' voices are never to be overshadowed by anyone else's voice. To elicit the valuable voices of the participants, the portraitist must develop dynamic "productive and benign relationships" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135) with participants to build trust, comfort, and authenticity while sharing their stories. It is during the creation of the portraits when themes begin to take shape and the portraitist uses synthesis, convergence, and contrast to determine repetitive refrains, patterns among perspectives, and more (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Finally, all of these components are woven together to create the aesthetic whole, the portrait, the art (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

As CRT is the basis of this study's theoretical framework, portraiture is a natural fit for the study's main qualitative approach. According to Chapman (2007), "Portraiture and CRT share a number of features that make the two a viable pair for conducting research" (p. 156). Those features include the importance of contexts, the role of the researcher, and a commitment to social justice. As a White researcher who was once a teacher of gifted students, it was imperative that I checked my personal beliefs and experiences at the door so that my participants' voices could shine through. My previous role as teacher of gifted did allow certain advantages, such as being familiar with the gifted eligibility process along with the various models of gifted instruction. Knowing

that I was once a classroom teacher and could easily understand the academic contexts discussed allowed my participants to speak freely and honestly about their experiences in a gifted education program. I discussed with participants my work with the Georgia Association for Gifted Children's (GAGC) Coalition for Access and Equity as the group works to "combat the issues of implicit bias, exclusion, and lack of understanding that led to educational disparities which prevent diverse students from realizing their potential" (GAGC, 2020, para. 2) and found that participants were eager to learn more about the group's work. Understanding my commitment to social justice was important not just to me, but to my participants' faith in the study, as well.

Hampsten (2015) cautioned researchers about challenges they may encounter when applying the portraiture approach to a study, one of which lies in the creation of the portraits themselves. Participants in portraiture studies must be open to extensive investigation, including multiple intensive interviews. These data collection methods can be emotionally exhausting for both researcher and participant. Due to the nature of the portraiture approach, there must be a respectful and trusting relationship between these two parties so that the participant is open and honest with the researcher, and the researcher is able to "channel the spirit of the individual" (Hampsten, 2015, p. 470) through the writing of the participant's narrative. Even with the challenges, which loomed ahead of me, I believed the reward of unearthing my participants' rich stories would make these challenges worthwhile.

Along with portraiture, I used counter-storytelling to bring attention to the marginalized voices of gifted Black students (Lewis Ellison & Solomon, 2019) through the portraits of six such students. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017),

counterstories are “writing[s] that aim to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 171). These majoritarian stories strive to silence the voices of people of color and promote prevailing racial stereotypes, such as dark skin and poverty being synonymous with bad schools (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). By using the critical race methodology of counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to create portraits of my participants, I allowed my participants’ voices to be heard above the noise created by majoritarian stories and their perspectives to challenge normally “uncontested supremacies” (Lewis Ellison & Solomon, 2019, p. 225) related to gifted education. Using the *other people’s stories* form of counter-storytelling as described by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), I revealed my participants’ “experiences with and responses to racism” (p. 33) within a rural gifted education program. The authors outlined their method of creating counter-stories, which included using data collected from the research study, existing literature on the topic, and their personal and professional experiences. Following this method not only allowed me to share my participants’ stories with my readers, but also allowed me to explicitly present my own experiences, adding to my study’s validity.

Lived experience, as a concept within the methodology of phenomenology, “is a representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject’s human experiences, choice, and options and how those factors influence one’s perception of knowledge” (Boylorn, 2008, p. 489). Before examining how my participants perceived their experiences in a gifted education program, I first elicited from them their actual experiences and stories, and then prompted the participants to reflect on those experiences. I also explored my own experiences as a teacher of gifted Black students

before reflecting upon and making meaning of my own experiences. As lived experiences play such a prominent role in my study, it may be somewhat influenced by the phenomenological method of qualitative research. In the next section, I will describe the setting of the study in order for readers to get a clear picture of where the participants come from.

Setting

This study took place in a P-12 public school system in rural southwest Georgia. The school system, which is one of two school systems located in the same county, has a population of 5,837 students within five traditional schools and one 8-12 charter school. Across the six schools, 53% of students are White and 47% of students are non-White (representing Black, Hispanic, Asian, and multiracial students). All of the system's schools, excluding the traditional high school, are Title I schools and all students receive free breakfast and lunch. The majority of students participate in regular education, but early intervention programs (EIP), special education programs, and a gifted education program are also offered for students requiring those services.

In the Liberty Valley School System (pseudonym), students are universally screened for gifted eligibility beginning in the second semester of kindergarten and can begin receiving gifted services as early as first grade. Students are also universally screened in first, third, and sixth grades. During the 2022-2023 academic year, out of the system's population of 5,479 students in grades 1-12, 376 students were identified as gifted and participated in the gifted education program. Black students, while comprising 29% of the system's total population, account for 12% of the gifted population. Based on Ford's (2013) 20% equity allowance formula, Black students should represent 23.2% of

the system's gifted population, a difference of 11.2 percentage points from their actual enrollment. This underrepresentation of Black students in the gifted education program allowed me to purposefully and deliberately select the Liberty Valley School System as the setting of this study. After selecting the setting of the study, I moved forward with recruiting potential participants via purposeful sampling.

Participant Selection

There are various selection methods available from which researchers may choose participants. For this study, I used a purposefully designed approach to determine my participants. Creswell (2014) described purposeful sampling as deliberately choosing participants and settings that will provide the most help to the researcher in answering his or her research questions. Participants for this study met the following criteria: 1) identified as Black, 2) identified as gifted based on state criteria during the K-12 career, 3) participated in a gifted education program within a rural school system, and 4) graduated from the rural school system within the past 5 years. My goal was to include at least six participants in the study, which allowed me to explore multiple perspectives while still giving each participant's stories the focus and consideration they deserve. The participants, whose names are being kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms I created, were accessible to me as they are graduates of the school system where I am employed, and we maintain contact information in our student information system (SIS), even after a student graduates. I obtained the necessary permission (see Appendix B) from the system's superintendent before looking for data within the SIS.

I experienced significant difficulty securing contributors for this study, leading to a great deal of frustration. As the criteria of being identified as Black and as gifted based

on Georgia's state rule during their K-12 career, along with participating in a gifted education program and graduating from their rural school system within the past 5 years were quite narrow, the number of possible participants was low. Out of the previous five graduating classes from Liberty Valley High School, only 13 students were identified as Black and eligible for gifted services based on Georgia state board rule. Of these 13 possible participants, four were female and nine were male. My difficulty in finding possible participants underscored the need for more research in the area of identifying gifted Black students and of their recruitment into and retention in gifted education programs. After gathering the names and contact information for the 13 possible participants, I sent each a recruitment flyer and contact form, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope the participant could use to return the contact form. I received three forms back within 2 weeks and those three individuals became my first three participants (pseudonyms: Wayne, Letitia, and Emmanuel). The frustration I felt during this part of the process is evident in the following memo.

While I wasn't surprised at the low number of possible participants for my study, I must say I was shocked by such a low number. How could there be only 13 gifted Black students in five graduating classes? On one hand, it makes me angry that so few Black students were given the opportunity to participate in gifted education. On the other hand, I felt validated in my selection of the topic of gifted Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education as there is obviously a need for systemic change. I'm a bit frustrated that I haven't heard back from more possible participants. Right now, I feel like I'm spinning my wheels, just hoping

that more kids will respond to my recruitment flyer. (Researcher journal, July 6, 2020)

After another 2 weeks went by, I mailed duplicate flyers and contact forms to the unresponsive possible participants. I also attempted to locate the remaining 10 possible participants through social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram. I found 6 of the remaining 10 on Facebook and sent each person a private instant message, briefly describing my study and asking him or her to let me know of any interest in participating. I received one response and Felicia (pseudonym) became my fourth study participant. I never received any additional contact forms, nor did I receive any additional responses to my social media messages. Then, 2 weeks after I completed the portraits for my four participants, I was contacted via Facebook Messenger by an additional potential study participant to whom I had reached out during my initial search. This participant, who became Donovan in this study, said that originally, he decided he did not want to participate in the interview process, but just could not get the idea of the study out of his mind. I sent Donovan another contact form at his request and received it back, completed, within a week.

In an attempt to find one more participant from a very limited pool, I decided to look for students who fit the requirements of my study and were at some point enrolled in the same school system as the first five participants, but perhaps did not graduate from the system's high school. Using the most recent graduation year (2022) as my guide, I looked at the population of the school system's middle school during 2014-2018 to determine which gifted Black students participated in the school system's gifted program at one time, but who left the system before graduating from high school. That is how I

found Reggie, a gifted Black student who participated in the school system’s gifted program through the 8th grade before transferring to the city school system’s high school and participating in their gifted education program. I found Reggie on Facebook, explained the premise of my study, requested his email address, and sent the informational flyer and contact form to him. I received Reggie’s contact form back via email within 24 hours and that is when I assigned him a pseudonym for this study. Table 1 provides the demographic information for my six study participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Profiles

| Pseudonym | Gender | Grade Level Identified as Gifted |
|-----------|--------|----------------------------------|
| Wayne | Male | 6 |
| Letitia | Female | 6 |
| Emmanuel | Male | 6 |
| Felicia | Female | 2 |
| Donovan | Male | 8 |
| Reggie | Male | 1 |

Interviews were scheduled through Facebook instant messages and through text messages, and were conducted through either Zoom, an online video conferencing program, or in face-to-face meetings. Table 2 provides the format of each participant interview. All face-to-face interviews were held in my office at the local school system’s central office campus. Participants’ availability dictated the interview schedule for each, and some interviews were rescheduled based on either participant or interviewer scheduling conflicts. I carefully considered each participant’s needs in order to make him

or her as comfortable with the interview process as possible. As Seidman (2013) suggested, I asked each participant how he or she would like to be addressed and where he or she would like to sit (during in-person interviews). I also confirmed that participants understood the consent statement, as well as the anonymity protection described in the consent statement, before each interview in the three-interview series. I strived to honor each participant’s time and kept each interview on track and focused. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked the participant and asked him or her to contact me if any questions arose. Approximately 1 week after the final interview with each participant, I sent him or her a thank you card with a \$25 Amazon gift card enclosed as a token of my appreciation. In the next section, I will discuss the procedures I used for collecting data.

Table 2

Interview Format

| Participant | Interview Format |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| Wayne | 3 Online |
| Letitia | 1 Online, 2 Face-to-Face |
| Emmanuel | 3 Face-to-Face |
| Felicia | 3 Online |
| Donovan | 3 Face-to-Face |
| Reggie | 2 Online |

Data Collection Procedures

With this study, my hope, albeit ambitious, was to gain “a comprehensive and complete understanding” (Roberts, 2010, p. 143) of what it is like to be a Black student in

a predominantly White, rural gifted education program. As a qualitative researcher, I was the main data-gathering instrument and storytelling source. Therefore, data collection was crucial as I analyzed the meanings participants attached to their experiences. There are four basic types of data collection procedures in qualitative research: observations, interviews, documents, and audio/visual materials (Creswell, 2014). For this study, I focused on interviews in order to obtain thick, rich data for analysis (Patton, 2015) because I sought to understand participants' experiences as Black students within a predominantly White rural gifted education program as well as the meanings they assigned to those experiences.

Researchers cannot possibly observe everything they wish to study; therefore, they use interviewing to “enter into the other person’s [participant’s] perspective” (Patton, 2015, p. 426). In an effort to gather participant stories, perspectives, and lived experiences, I used Seidman’s (2013) three-interview approach with each participant while implementing an interview guide as suggested by Patton (2015) (see Appendix C). According to Patton, the interview guide consists of “questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview” (2015, p. 439) and allows the interviewer to make the most of the available time. The interview guide also provides the interviewer with freedom to probe for elaboration and create follow-up questions, such as map-the-territory questions (R. Schmertzling, personal communication, March 9, 2019), as needed.

Following Seidman’s (2013) approach, the first interview of the three-interview series focused on the participant’s life history as it related to the topic of being a gifted Black student in a rural gifted education program. In the second interview, I focused on collecting the details of the participants’ experiences, and for the final interview, I asked

participants to reflect on the meaning they attached to their experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 75-90 minutes each; were conducted either virtually through Zoom, an online meeting platform, or in-person at a location of the participant's choosing; and spaced approximately 3 to 7 days apart for each participant. Interviews were audio recorded in order to capture participants' exact words. I used a semistructured interview format, allowing me to deviate from the interview guide's preplanned questions in order to delve deeper into a participant's response and to maintain a more conversational tone (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2007).

As suggested by Seidman (2013), I asked each participant to tell me a story about whatever experience he or she was describing, if I felt the prompting was necessary. During each interview, I made note of the participant's facial expressions and body language as nonverbal communication can be just as valuable as their verbal responses. I included these notes in a memo written shortly after each interview was complete (Merriam, 2002). After memoing, I personally transcribed the interview verbatim using the audio recording to help with data analysis. I wanted to use my transcriptions wisely, and by "deliberately emphasizing aspects of what [was] being transcribed in order to examine them more closely" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 129). During transcription, I kept the participant's original vernacular and grammar the same as the audio recording so as to maintain the integrity of the participant's voice. For example, if a participant did not use standard subject-verb agreement, such as saying "We was" instead of "We were," I kept the participant's original words instead of changing the phrase to the accepted standard vernacular. I compared each transcription with my notes taken during the

corresponding interview and noted instances of long pauses, laughter, deep sighs, and filler words to help me get to the emotions held within the participant's responses.

The transcription process was certainly time-consuming, but the insights gained through the process were priceless as I was drawn closer to the data. These transcripts were my primary data source, but I also incorporated my personal memos and notes to add to what the participants said without saying. While Seidman (2013) preferred to “avoid any in-depth analysis of the interview data” (p. 116) until all interviews were finished, he also gave researchers permission to use what they heard in one interview to guide successive ones. This ongoing analysis kept me from letting all of my “unanalyzed field notes and transcripts pile up, making the task of final analysis much more difficult and discouraging” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 104). Once I finished transcribing and memoing on an interview, I reread both data sources to determine which questions should be asked in the following interview. I then listened to the interview again while reading the corresponding transcript to ensure that my transcription was accurate. I used pseudonyms for all interview participants, allowing their interview responses to remain confidential, and I will erase audio recordings from all recording devices once my dissertation is complete. I will secure all interview transcripts for 3 years before deleting them from all digital storage devices and shredding all paper copies. I analyzed data throughout the data collection process, and the data analysis procedures I used are discussed in the next section.

Data Analysis Procedures

The bulk of the qualitative data generated in this study came from participant interviews as well as the researcher memos I added along the way. Figure 1 is a summary of my data analysis process, with arrows indicating the flow of the analysis process.

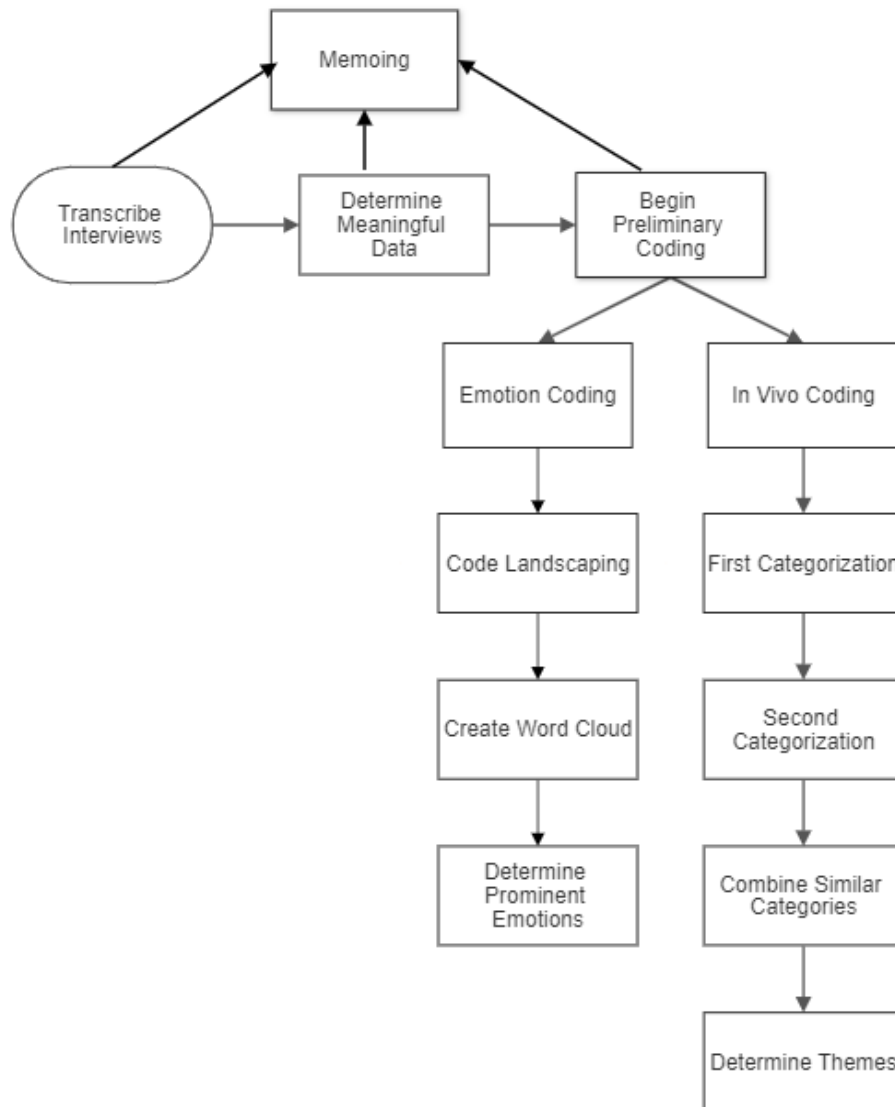


Figure 1: *Data Analysis Procedures*

After each interview, I downloaded the audio recording file to my computer's hard drive, and I emailed it to myself, as well. I wanted as many backup files of each recording as possible. The fear of losing such important data remained in the back of my mind during

the entire collection and analysis processes. I personally transcribed each interview using Google docs, an online word processor. In order to maintain the participants' true experiences and stories, I transcribed each interview verbatim, only changing names to pseudonyms, when necessary. I also included any nonverbal cues I noted during each interview, as well as any *aha* moments that occurred during researcher memoing. Once the initial transcription of an interview was done, I played the audio recording again while reading along, making any needed additions or revisions.

Once the transcription process was complete, I asked each participant to review his or her three interview transcriptions to confirm that the experiences I transcribed were clear and accurate, and to keep my researcher subjectivity in check, as well. I then reviewed the data twice before preliminary analysis and coding began (Roberts, 2010). Maxwell (2013) recommended data analysis begin as soon as the first interview ends, so that is what I did. During the pre-analysis, I looked for areas of significance in order to construct prominent themes, patterns, and categories and to reduce the amount of data into "meaningful chunks" (Seidman, 2013, p. 120). As the researcher, I was responsible for determining what data were most meaningful, insightful, and relevant as related to the research questions. While reading the interview transcripts, interview notes, and memos, I highlighted information I deemed meaningful in order to make the data more manageable, noting in the margins why the information was meaningful. I looked for passages that were consistent across participants, focusing on patterns within the data, as well as the uniqueness of each participant's experiences. Seidman (2013) suggested including passages of data that connect to the literature in some way, whether through agreement or contradiction, to support findings or to offer new insights into the topic.

Including contradictory ideas, of which there were several, helped to keep my researcher subjectivity in check and forced me to explore all perspectives on the issue

Once important passages were determined, I began the process of labeling the data with identifying terms, which is known as coding. According to Saldaña (2016), coding occurs as a “transitional process between data collection and . . . data analysis” (p. 5). Before conducting my study, I was unsure as to what type(s) of coding would best suit my data, but I did anticipate an inductive as opposed to deductive approach to coding. Saldaña (2016) proposed that researchers begin with “a combination of [the] basic coding methods as a ‘generic’ approach to [one’s] data and analysis” (p. 73). These first-cycle basic coding methods included but were not limited to in vivo coding, descriptive coding, and values coding. Saldaña also suggested that the researcher remain open to changing coding methods if the original methods did not generate meaningful discoveries for the researcher. Table 3 depicts my first attempt with initial coding of important passages, and Table 4 provides examples of transcript text for each code.

While reviewing Saldaña’s work and considering the coding task ahead of me, I certainly felt overwhelmed by the various coding methods, resulting in a bit of anxiety over choosing just the right methods to use for my study. Following the author’s advice to “take qualitative data analysis one datum at a time,” (2016, p. 76), I worked through Wayne’s transcript as a coding practice trial in order to become more comfortable with the coding process. Through trial and error, along with repeated readings of Saldaña’s coding examples, I became less anxious about the coding process and was ready to tackle that beast for real.

Table 3

Initial Coding

| Code | Code Description | Category |
|------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| SF | Supportive family | Relationships |
| M | Mentors | |
| RT | Relationships with teachers | |
| RP | Relationships with peers | |
| C | Competitiveness | School Life |
| LL | Love of learning | |
| DC | Difficulty of classes | |
| BI | Behavior issues | |
| AW | Acting White | Social-Emotional Factors |
| RI | Racial identity | |
| SI | Scholar identity | |

Table 4

Transcript Text for Each Initial Code

| Collaborator | Transcript | Initial Code |
|--------------|---|--------------|
| Wayne | I think part of the reason there weren't more Black students in my classes boils down to opportunity and support. My family provided me with tremendous opportunities, and they were so supportive, but that's not always the case for other Black people in my hometown. | SF |
| Reggie | My dad Melvin is the epitome of the man I want to be. He's one of those men who leads more by example than by words. | M |
| Emmanuel | She [teacher] didn't get angry at me or anything, but she just told me that she would help me figure out the problem. I was still mad at myself for not being able to figure out the problem on my own, but it was nice to have a teacher in my corner. | RT |

Table 4 (continued).

| | | |
|----------|---|----|
| Felicia | My friend group, especially my tight group of cheer mates, was really more outside of my classes but my being in the advanced and honors classes never seemed to bother them. [They] would always celebrate my academic achievements along with me. | RP |
| Donovan | I had this drive to be the best I could be at everything. I don't really remember competing with my classmates when it came to school back in elementary, but I do remember competing with myself. | C |
| Letitia | Oh, man, I loved starting school! School was so exciting because I just like learning new things, and when I first started school, almost everything was new. | LL |
| Emmanuel | I went to class everyday ready to learn something new and to be challenged. The critical thinking that was involved in solving those problems. I just couldn't get enough of those problems. | DC |
| Reggie | Even though I was in a gifted class with all of these smart kids, that didn't stop me from being bad. I would get bored so I would start talking and goofing off. | BI |
| Letitia | On several occasions, I was told that I was acting White and talking White because I hung out with a lot of gifted people who happened to be White and were into the things I was into. | AW |
| Wayne | I never noticed that I was acting any differently once I started taking gifted classes. I guess maybe I was just acting like the new friends I was with every day, but I didn't take acting like my new [White] friends as a negative. | RI |
| Felicia | I just seemed to enjoy math more than my classmates did and I was certainly better at math than most of them. | SI |

For my first round of coding, I used the elemental coding method of *in vivo* coding, which allowed me to choose the words and phrases from my participants that stood out as significant, such as “competitiveness” and “tight-knit family,” and to keep those codes in my participants’ voices. In addition, *in vivo* coding is particularly appropriate for beginning qualitative researchers, making it even more of a perfect fit for this study (Saldaña, 2016). This method of coding supports both portraiture and counter-storytelling, where the researcher strives to keep the participants’ voices at the center of the study. For this reason, I took Saldaña’s (2022) suggestion and placed all *in vivo* codes inside quotation marks next to the line(s) from which I pulled the code. To remain true to each participant’s voice, I first coded each interview transcript separately from the others before looking for similarities and differences across the data sets to determine group codes (Saldaña, 2016). Table 5 contains examples of my *in vivo* codes.

After completing the first round of coding, I returned to my interview transcripts, this time with an affective lens. Saldaña (2016) described affective coding methods as those that “investigate subjective qualities of human experience by directly acknowledging and naming those experiences” (p. 124). Within this category of methods, I chose to use *emotion* coding because I wanted to focus on the feelings my participants experienced and shared with me during their interviews. Emotions “are a universal human experience” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 125), and as such can provide insight to participants’ experiences and perspectives. Whenever I associated an emotion with a participant’s words, I highlighted the text and wrote the associated emotion in the margin next to the text. Emotions can surface not only through participants’ written or spoken words but also through their vocal nuances and body language, which I noted in the

researcher memos written immediately after each interview. Table 6 contains examples of my emotion codes.

Table 5

Examples of In Vivo Coding

| Collaborator | Transcript | Code |
|--------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Wayne | This way, more students would be <i>challenged in their academics</i> through varying levels of courses, such as advanced and honors classes. | Challenged in their academics |
| Letitia | Even though she was older, Francie and I would help each other with homework, and she was always very <i>supportive of me</i> . | Supportive of me |
| Emmanuel | I can still hear Tyrell telling me that I was <i>acting White</i> because I was in classes with the White gifted kids and the smart Black kids that he said acted White, too. | Acting White |
| Felicia | Taking honors and AP classes was always enough for me, and having the gifted label attached to my name just wasn't that important. I just <i>loved learning</i> . | Loved learning |
| Donovan | Taking honors and AP classes was always enough for me, and <i>having the gifted label</i> attached to my name just wasn't that important. | Having the gifted label |
| Reggie | That was the year that I really became <i>competitive</i> , both with myself and with my peers. | Competitive |

Table 6

Examples of Emotion Coding

| Collaborator | Transcript | Code |
|--------------|--|--------------|
| Wayne | I knew at that time that my strength was social studies, and I wasn't able to show my social studies knowledge on that test. | Self-Aware |
| Letitia | I would see my Black friends who weren't in gifted classes building relationships and making connections with each other, but I couldn't do that because I spent all day in gifted classes with only White people. | Lonely |
| Emmanuel | My math teacher Mrs. Foy thought I was the best thing since sliced bread . . . she would actually say that to me! | Accomplished |
| Felicia | I wasn't the only Black student in the class, but the teacher seemed to give the White students more leeway when it came to turning assignments in late and things like that. | Angry |
| Donovan | It was like it was official that me and my friends were really smart and so were these other kids that were now in classes with us. | Validated |
| Reggie | I credit my five sixth-grade gifted teachers with really turning my bad self around and helping me become a young gentleman instead of a young thug. | Supported |

Once I completed coding all of my interview transcripts, I created lists of my codes in a Google Docs document. One list included my in vivo codes, and the other list included my emotion codes. Creating these lists of codes allowed me to have all of my codes in one document, which made the codes more manageable. Because my interviews followed Seidman's (2013) three-interview format, my transcripts were already written in a loose chronological order, so that is how I organized both my in vivo and emotion codes. I split both lists of codes into *childhood/family*, *elementary/middle school*, *high school*, *post high school*. This categorization made it easier for me to see when parts of participants' lives were similar and when they were different. Once I had my in vivo and

emotion codes in lists, it was obvious that some codes were more prevalent in the transcripts than others. I began to see patterns and major categories within the codes I used (Saldaña, 2022). Noting this, I decided to take Saldaña’s (2016) text back out and search for his ideas on presenting data in a visually-pleasing way, eventually landing on the strategies of code landscaping and code mapping.

Code landscaping, according to Saldaña (2016), is a way to integrate “textual and visual methods to see both the forest and the trees” (p. 223). The author shared an example of a word cloud, a design where more frequently-used words appear in a larger font than that of less frequently-used words. Being familiar with creating word clouds from my time as a classroom teacher, I decided to create word clouds for my emotion codes to provide readers with a graphic representation of the importance of the various codes I used. Using a website called Free Word Cloud Generator, I first copied and pasted my emotion codes from my Google Doc into the online tool, creating the word cloud depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 2: *Word Cloud from Emotion Codes*

While code landscaping was an appropriate way to graphically represent my emotion codes, I realized it would not be an appropriate representation of my in vivo codes. Because my in vivo codes contained single words and phrases, I chose to use code mapping instead of code landscaping as a graphic representation of the codes. Code mapping is “a straightforward technique that gives you a condensed textual view of your study, and potentially transforms your codes first into organized categories, and then into higher-level concepts” (Saldaña 2016, p. 222).

Again, I was unsure of how to begin this process, so I went to Saldaña’s (2022) YouTube video, hoping to gain a better understanding of the code mapping process. In the video, Saldaña compares piles of same-color Lego blocks as codes. These codes were created after the huge pile of multiple blocks in various colors, representing data, were sorted by color. Categories, depicted by nice stacks of blocks separated by color, were a more organized way to display how the codes formed patterns. This building block visual helped me gain a stronger understanding of how to move from my in vivo codes to categories codes that look alike and feel alike (Saldaña, 2022).

Having previously listed and chronologically grouped all of my in vivo codes in a Google Doc, which was my first round of code mapping, I then took all of the codes and grouped them into categories based on similarities. This categorization process became my second round of code mapping. As I determined each category, I found the in vivo codes that were associated with the category and matched the code to the category. I initially created 11 categories based on the codes I used, and, using the Google Sheets spreadsheet program, noted the frequency of each code as it occurred for each participant. I originally planned on using MAXQDA, a qualitative computer data analysis program,

to make the task of coding a bit less laborious, but I decided to use an organizational tool with which I was familiar instead of trying to learn how to use a new one. Saldaña (2016) suggested that the novice researcher code on “hard-copy printouts first, not via a computer monitor” (p. 29), and I eagerly followed his advice. Even though I knew that hand coding would be quite time-consuming (Seidman, 2013), I wanted to spend my time really digging into the data instead of fumbling through an unfamiliar computer program. As Saldaña (2016) stated, “There is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that gives you more control over and ownership of the work” (p. 29), and I could not have agreed with the author more.

Once I completed the spreadsheet, I then uploaded the data within the spreadsheet to the online RAWGraphs 2.0 platform to create a matrix plot, which is shown in Figure 3. I was able to use the matrix plot to determine which categories were the most and the least represented in each participant’s interview transcripts. The larger the box under the category name, the more frequently the participant’s transcript was coded for that category. The smaller the box, the smaller the number of occurrences found in the participant’s interview transcript. For example, Felicia discussed experiences related to behavior issues more frequently than Donovan. This visual representation allowed me to see the category data as a whole before I began the third round of code mapping.

For my third round of code mapping, which Saldaña (2016) described as “catergoriz[ing] the categories even further” (p. 222), I took the 11 categories from my matrix plot and reduced them to four main topics: *relationships with others*, *strong racial identity*, *love of learning and academic challenge*, and *need for achievement*. Table 7 shows which of the 11 categories goes with each of the four main topics. Before settling

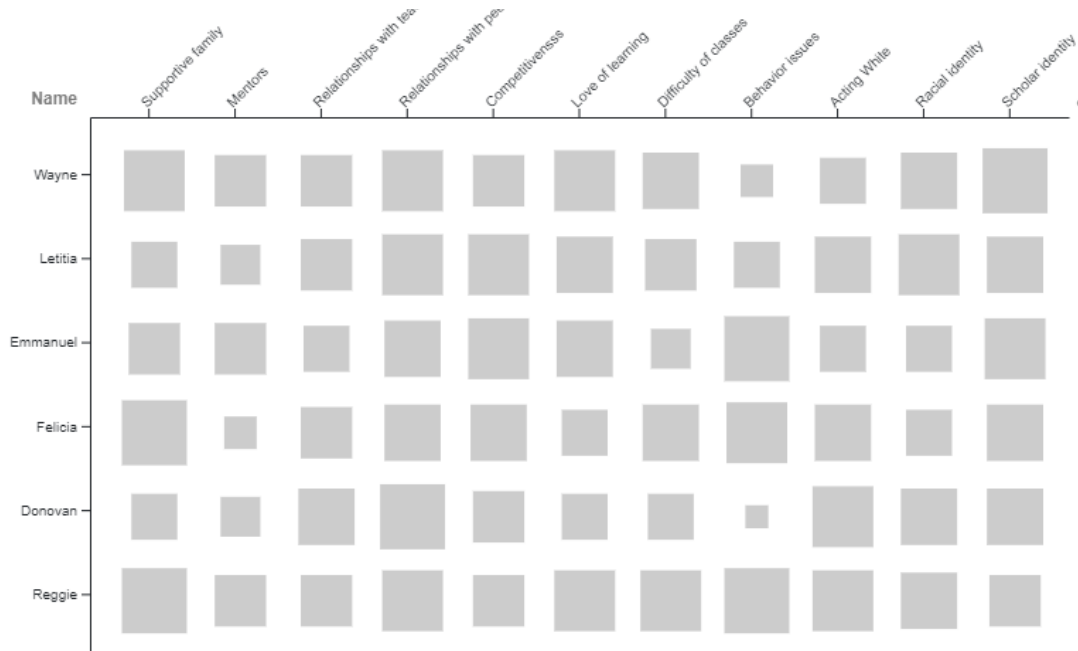


Figure 3: *Matrix Plot of Categories*

on these four topics, I went back to my researcher memos in order to cross-reference them with the in vivo codes from my interview transcripts. Once I was sure of these four topics, I used each one to create a sentence “that organizes and identifies what a group of repeating ideas is about and/or what it means” (Saldaña, 2022). These sentences, which were based on my interpretation of the data (Packer, 2011) became my themes. As themes began to appear during the data analysis phase, I was able to identify them within each individual participant as well as across the participants, in order to interpret the data and determine the lessons learned during the course of my study. In Chapter 5, I discussed each of these themes in detail: (a) *relationships are important to the participants’ social and academic lives*; (b) *participants share the characteristics of a strong racial identity*; (c) *participants have a love of learning and of academic challenge*, and; (d) *participants have a strong need for achievement*. Table 7 provides examples of each theme, its subcategories, and supporting commentary from participant interviews.

Table 7

Themes, Subcategories, and Supporting Commentary

| Theme | Subcategories | Supporting Commentary |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| Relationships are important to the participants' social and academic lives. | <i>Relationships with Family</i> | "My family provided me with tremendous opportunities, and they were so supportive, but that's not always the case for other Black people in my hometown." |
| | <i>Relationships with Teachers</i> | "I credit my sixth-grade teachers with really turning my bad self around and helping me become a young gentleman instead of a young thug." |
| | <i>Relationships with Peers</i> | "When I couldn't hang out on the weekends because I had assignments . . . my friends were supportive of that. My friends would always celebrate my academic achievements along with me." |
| Participants share the characteristics of a strong racial identity. | <i>Acting White</i> | "On several occasions, I was told that I was acting White and talking White because I hung out with a lot of gifted people who happened to be White and were into the things I was into." |
| | <i>Scholar Identity</i> | "As much as I love football, academics and learning has always been first with me." |
| | <i>Connection to Culture</i> | "I never felt like I was losing myself as a Black kid or that I was becoming disconnected from my cultural community because my family was so important to me and they kept me culturally grounded." |
| Participants possess a love of learning and of academic challenge. | <i>Academic Self-Confidence</i> | "There's always been a hunger in me for learning new things (there's that curiosity again) and I just want to soak up as much knowledge as I can." |
| | <i>Desire to Please</i> | "I knew if I got in trouble for fighting . . . I'd get kicked off the football team. Worse, I'd disappoint my teachers." |
| | <i>Need for Challenge</i> | "I thought to myself, 'Surely the work is going to get more challenging and fun!' That's what I had grown used to in prior years, so that's what I was expecting." |

Table 7 (continued).

| | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| Participants have a strong need for achievement. | <i>Learning Comes First</i> | “I was going to play football there, but the coach knew that I was serious about my academics, and that football would come second.” |
| | <i>Achievement Over Affiliation</i> | “There was some serious internal conflict going on inside me, but since my academics were most important to me, I made the decision to tune out those people who didn’t truly understand me.” |
| | <i>Competitive Drive</i> | “Things changed a bit as I got older, and I did start comparing myself with some of my peers, but I’ve always been more competitive with the guy I see in the mirror.” |

Throughout the data analysis process, I wrote several analytic memos to help track my thinking and allow me to get those thoughts onto paper. When time did not allow for writing a memo by hand, I recorded an audio memo using my phone’s voice memo application and later used the TranscribeMe online human transcription service to put my spoken thoughts into text. Maxwell (2013) considered memos as “one of the most important techniques” (p. 20) the researcher uses for developing his or her thoughts and ideas and posited that memoing should occur throughout the entire research process. Memos enabled me to reflect on and critique my coding and categorizing, as well as my construction of themes and overall analysis of the data.

In Chapter 4, I shared my participants’ stories through the use of descriptive first-person narratives (Seidman, 2013), I created a portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) of each of the six participants. These first-person stories became counter-stories that illustrated how all six participants’ stories went against the majority viewpoint that Black students do not succeed in gifted education programs (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I was able to combine, or cobble together (Maxwell, 2013), portions of these three approaches

to my research design, which resulted in a *bricolage* approach (Maxwell, 2013) to my research. According to Maxwell, the *bricoleur* is one who adapts to a situation, using whatever tools and materials are available to complete a project or determine unique solutions to a problem. As the researcher, I was able to take pieces of first-person narratives, portraits, and counter-stories that were appropriate to my research topic and put them together in a way that made the most sense for my specific study.

To begin crafting my first-person portraits, I created a Google word document for each of the six participants, using the chosen pseudonyms as file titles. I then copied and pasted the transcript data from each interview into the appropriate participant file. I did not include my interview questions, nor any filler words used by the participants, unless I felt them necessary for the aesthetic of the portrait. In order to improve the flow of the portrait, I rearranged data so that each portrait became more chronological in nature. Seidman (2013) stressed the importance of using the first-person in order to highlight the true voice of the participant instead of my interpretation of that voice. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about each participant's experiences and story, and I certainly did not want to take away from those stories by putting them into my own words. I stayed true to each participant's words, only adding my own when needed to enhance the meaning of the participant's word choice. My words are indicated by the use of italics or brackets. To each portrait, I also included both an introduction to the participant as well as a reflection of my own. Each introduction allowed the reader to gain a bit of background knowledge of the individual participant, and each reflection allowed me to connect what I learned about each participant to existing research and to the other participants.

Validity

The concept of validity is often thought to relate only to quantitative research, yet Maxwell (2013) argued that validity is applicable to qualitative research, as well, and must be considered in order to reduce possible validity threats. Maxwell considered the two biggest validity threats to qualitative research to be researcher bias and reactivity. In a qualitative study, it is impossible to completely remove researcher bias (Maxwell, 2013; Peshkin, 1988) or researcher influence (Maxwell, 2013) because the researcher is the data collection instrument. However, if you “explain your possible biases and how you will deal with these” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124), you will retain your integrity as a researcher and the integrity of the study, resulting in validity. A validity matrix (see Appendix D) is one tool that can help the researcher retain that integrity.

Throughout the development of my study, I maintained memos on my potential biases regarding my topic, about which I am passionate, and about how I dealt with those biases, creating trustworthiness in my study and in myself as a researcher. While Maxwell mentioned a few ways to combat this issue, I think it is important to note that he also stated, “What is important is to understand *how* you are influencing what the informant says, and how this affects the validity of the inferences you can draw from the interview” (p. 125, emphasis in original). I also considered Lewis Ellison and Solomon’s (2019) claim that members of “some populations may be skeptical of researchers who do not look like them” (p. 225). As a cultural outsider, I went into the study with the assumption that some of my participants may not be as forthcoming with their lived experiences and stories because of my position and appearance, but after establishing a trusting relationship with each participant, my participants appeared relaxed and easily

discussed their stories, even contacting me after the interviews were completed to share additional thoughts and ideas.

Along with Maxwell's idea of bias, I was also aware of my *subjective I's*, as described by Peshkin (1988). Subjective I's are those subjectivities each person possesses that can "filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, or misconstrue what happens" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 20) during the course of a study. These subjectivities can be managed, according to Peshkin, when the researcher is aware of them and formally self-monitors to keep the *subjective I's* in check. The main subjective I that I recognize in myself is the *Fair-Isn't-Always-Equal I*. I am a firm believer that every student is an individual and should therefore be treated as such. In my professional role as curriculum director, I worked with several teachers who believe they aren't being fair if they are not treating all of the students equally. More than once, a White female teacher claimed to be colorblind, thinking this meant she was not racist, making her an unbiased and equitable teacher. I have heard multiple White teachers state, "I don't see differences in students because people are all the same." I worked hard to monitor this subjective I as I interviewed participants in order to keep it from distracting me from my research goals and questions. Audio recording and writing memos regularly throughout the process, along with continuously reviewing those recordings and memos, helped tremendously.

Another subjective I that I identified within myself is the *Teacher-of-Gifted-Students I*. While I am no longer a classroom teacher who spent the majority of her career in general education, I still consider the 4 years I taught gifted students as the best years of my teaching career. The gifted and talented students I taught constantly challenged me to be an expert in my field of English language arts, often developing analyses of prose

and poetry that I never considered, or creating pieces of writing that were soulful, moving, and emotional. These students endeared themselves to me, to the point where I considered each one my own, protecting them as if they were my own children. Therefore, I was fearful that my mama-bear side would come out if one of my participants described a negative situation or a negative teacher during an interview. For example, when Reggie described the locker room fight, which I detailed in Chapter 4, I found myself getting angry that he was the one punished for the fight when he was trying to defend himself. When I felt my anger rising, I was able to keep myself in check for the moment, but once the interview was over, I immediately began to memo about the participant's situation and my feelings regarding their experience. In my memo, I wrote

It was heartbreaking to hear Reggie describe the horrible locker room fight.

Watching his face while he relived that memory was almost unbearable. I could see the remorse in his eyes as they began to fill with tears. I heard his voice break as he described watching the fight on someone's cell phone. He was just trying to defend himself against the Acting White accusations being thrown at him by his so-called friends. I am trying to make myself remember that I wasn't there to see the fight, so I don't know the other side to the story. This thought is what helped me to stay neutral while listening to Reggie's description. (Researcher journal, September 4, 2022)

This reflection in form of a memo helped me to stay neutral during the interview while allowing me to still get my feelings out.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described my research design and research setting. I then explained my participant sampling process, including the difficulty I experienced in securing six participants who met my guidelines. Next, I discussed my data collection procedures, which focused on a three-interview series with each participant, as well as my data analysis process, including the use of in vivo coding. I ended the chapter by describing how I addressed any validity concerns as well as my awareness of my subjective I. These calculated, intentional, systematic steps were more than a simple research process to me. Each step was also personal and moving, as well as insightful. In Chapter 4, I introduce you to the collaborators of this work as they are the ones who bring the issues related to Black students' representation, involvement, and success in gifted programs to light.

Chapter IV

INDIVIDUAL PORTRAITS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of recently-graduated gifted Black students during their participation in a gifted education program. My goal was to accomplish this by interviewing participants and sharing their stories in their own words. I love stories, both reading them and writing them, and could not wait to hear each participant's story come alive through interviews. As I expected, the data collection process quickly became my favorite part of the entire study. I learned so much while being immersed in the literature regarding gifted Black students and their underrepresentation in gifted programming, but it was the interaction with each participant that renewed my passion for this issue and for this study.

The portraits of my study participants are considered counterstories because they go against so many narratives in the literature of gifted Black students being unsuccessful in gifted education programs. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) defined counterstories, a critical race methodology, as “writing[s] that aim to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 171). I focused on using the *other people's stories* method of counter-storytelling as described by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) to reveal my participants' lived experiences with racism and to unlock the ways in which they dealt with those experiences within a rural gifted education program. Counterstories are not completely free of negative experiences, as demonstrated by the counterstories in this study, but the inclusion of those negative experiences shows how

gifted Black students navigated through a complex, systemically-racist educational setting (Chapman, 2007) and brings meaning and purpose to this study.

The storytellers in my study are Wayne, Letitia, Emmanuel, Felicia, Donovan, and Reggie. These names were pseudonyms chosen by me, the researcher, and not by the participants. Seidman (2013) stressed the importance of choosing pseudonyms that recognized the issues of age, ethnicity, and context of each participant's life, so I took all three of those issues into consideration while choosing pseudonyms. All locations, names, and other identifiable information have been changed to protect each participant's privacy. All italicized and bracketed words are my own. All non-italicized words are direct quotes from the storytellers with minor modifications for ease of reading (Seidman, 2013). Seidman stressed the use of first person (as in the voice of the storyteller) in each profile to keep the researcher's voice from intruding on the participants' stories. Creating these first-person narratives allowed me to "be faithful to the words of the participant" (Seidman, 2013, p. 125), which was my main goal heading into portrait creation.

Wayne

"Seeing that F at the top of my returned test a few days later made me feel like maybe I didn't belong in classes with those gifted kids after all."

Meet Wayne

Wayne, 23, is currently a first-year middle school social studies teacher in a north Georgia school system, so all three of his interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online video conferencing tool. To accommodate his teaching schedule, we met virtually on three different Tuesday evenings, each meeting 3 weeks apart as suggested by Seidman (2013) and described in detail within the Methods Section. In order to gather more

details of Wayne's experiences, we met a fourth time (virtually) approximately 1 month after the third interview.

Wayne graduated from a prominent state college in May 2021 and was immediately offered a teaching position at one of the top middle schools in the state where he is currently the only Black faculty member. This elite suburban middle school is quite different from the rural middle school he attended as a student. The middle school Wayne attended was comprised of 53% White students, 36% Black students, 6% Hispanic students, 3.3% multiracial students, and .9% Asian/Pacific Islander students. However, the school where Wayne currently teaches includes 44% Asian/Pacific Islander students, 42% White students, 9% Hispanic students, 3% Black students, and 2% multiracial students. With the goal of making challenging and relevant education available to all students, Wayne was excited to share his gifted education story.

Wayne's Story

I grew up in a really tight-knit family. There was me, my older brother, my twin sister, my mom, and, for a while, my dad. My parents divorced when I was two, but they were both always involved in my life. Even though I had two different households while I was growing up, life was pretty great. We weren't rich by any means, but we weren't struggling. There really wasn't anything I went without. If I ever wanted something, my parents worked really hard to make sure I got it. I can't complain much about the way I was raised and the way my parents provided for us.

We lived in a mobile home park located about 10 minutes from most of the schools in the school system. There were always a lot of kids around . . . Black, White, Hispanic. Most of the families in the neighborhood were working class, and a lot of those

families, like mine, lived in single-mom households. I didn't really get to play with kids in my neighborhood except on the weekends because during the week, I concentrated on schoolwork. But on the weekends, my brother, sister, and I would head outside to see what was going on in the neighborhood. My brother Shawn would normally find a pickup game of football to join, but that was never my thing. I liked to ride my bike up and down the pothole-filled streets, trying to avoid hitting one of those throw-you-off-your-bike spots. That actually happened to me one time. I remember riding around and coming up on my brother and his friends playing football. Instead of watching where I was going, I was looking over at the football game, watching my brother being tackled by the biggest kid in the neighborhood. Just as Shawn hit the ground, I kid you not, I hit one of those asphalt monstrosities, lost my balance, and went down hard with my bike. It was like something out of a movie that seemed to happen in slow motion. Shawn and his friends all started laughing and pointing at me [pause] I was so embarrassed! Nothing was hurt except for my pride, and all it took was one look at the hole in my jeans to make that moment play over in my head. It took me a while to get back on that bike again.

I've always been close with my twin sister Beatrice. I'm 10 minutes older, by the way. She really is my best friend. It was weird, because she struggled academically growing up, and I really didn't, at least not in any serious way. With her being my twin, things got really weird around fifth grade because my mom decided to hold Bea back, thinking Bea wasn't ready to move on to the sixth grade. So, during the time from sixth grade to ninth grade [pause] people knew we were twins but were always asking me, "Why is your sister not in the same grade as you?" I'd just tell them that my parents didn't think she was ready to move on when I was—I didn't tell everyone her grades or

that she struggled academically. I never felt it was my place to share her business. Bea was always being compared to me, so that was hard enough for her. But, repeating fifth grade was really best for her, so Mom made the right decision. Bea actually ended up graduating the same year I did because she went to a charter school where she could move at her own pace in classes with fewer students. I was so proud seeing her walk across that stage to get her diploma!

Now my brother, my older brother Shawn who is 2 years older than me and Bea, is very different from both me and Bea. He's more hardheaded than we are, and he got into trouble a lot. In high school, he got suspended twice for fighting. When I asked him why he got into fights, he told me that he didn't know but that sometimes he just got so angry, he couldn't help it. Funny thing is, he's extremely gifted (not officially, but you can just tell), especially in social studies. He was actually the one who got me interested in social studies, come to think of it. He's a history geek, for sure! But because of his behavior and all that other stuff like being unmotivated and not always following the rules, he kind of struggled in school, too, but for different reasons than Bea. If he puts his mind into something, he does it really well. But he didn't like to do work or study, so he pretty much slacked off all the time. He always showed so much potential; I just wish he had the motivation to reach it.

After my parents divorced, Mom got primary custody of us kids, so we stayed in our house while Dad moved to a bigger city about 30 minutes away. The goal was to be with Dad every weekend, but because he worked for Pepsi-Co and was always on the road, we only got to see him about once a month. This allowed us to have a very strong relationship with our mom. Our mom [pause] man, she was just awesome. She's such a

hard worker. She worked as a nurse, and so just seeing her commitment to both her job and to us was so inspiring! We knew why she was always working, so she could provide for us, but she always made it a priority to support us in whatever we did, whatever we decided to do next. A real-life superwoman right there.

Not getting to see my dad a lot, my grandpa became like a surrogate dad for me and my siblings. Because my dad worked so much, my mom's dad stepped in to be a good, positive male influence, especially for me and my brother. Growing up, I saw my grandparents almost every day. After school, I would take the bus to my grandparents' instead of my own house because they were our babysitters. My grandpa's influence and the way that he managed his family and managed his love for all of his kids was so strong. In fact, my grandparents adopted three kids when my mom was just out of high school. The youngest of those is 29 now, just 6 years older than I am! My siblings and I were pretty much raised alongside my mom's adopted siblings; we all just sort of grew up together in that tight-knit family. I wouldn't change it for anything.

Man, when we went to our grandparents' house after school, there were strict rules. We did not watch TV—I mean, there was always a TV on, but it remained on CBS all day long. So, when we got home, *Oprah* would be on (I can still recognize her voice to this day), then the evening news, and then *Jeopardy!* That was the plan every single day. We knew exactly what was going on—what was going to go down—and that left us a lot of time to do our work. We'd know when we got home, we'd better get a snack and then get to our homework. That was the expectation and if we didn't meet it, then we got in trouble. Then and only then could we watch the news, if we'd like. But what I'd try to do was go outside or something, maybe run around and get some energy out. That was

basically it. Not really much time for exploring anything else, at least at home. And so, when I got to middle school, that's the reason I wanted to get involved with band, student government, and all the other activities available at school. It gave me something else to do besides just focusing on homework all the time.

Thinking back on school, I guess my earliest memory was in kindergarten. My mom was working the night shift at a factory while she was going to nursing school during the day, so I never really got to see her. Then one day, she came into my kindergarten classroom. I remember seeing her wearing her white nursing uniform and walking into the classroom to visit, and I got super excited when I saw her. But then she left, and I started to cry because I wanted her to stay. I mean I cried! I didn't get to see her very much during the day and that was such a nice surprise, but I didn't want her to go. That's not really a memory related to being in school, I guess, but more of a memory of my mom, but it stands out to me even to this day.

Back in elementary school, I definitely didn't take schoolwork as seriously as I did once I got to middle school. I mean, I worked hard to get good grades and learn as much as I could because that was the expectation. But I do remember there was a few kids in my class that were so competitive—we were doing multiplication tables or like the times tables test—and I'd always finish third behind these two other kids. I'd always feel like, "Why can't I beat them? Why can't I beat them in this?" We were pretty competitive, even though the teacher would say things like, "It's not a race. It's about how well you do. I don't care about who finishes first, but I do care about how many you get correct." That worked for me and I pulled back a bit. The other two didn't, though! They continued to fight it out on the times tables tests. Oh, and both of those students

were Black, too. To me, that wasn't a big deal. Back then, school was school. I knew I should try my best, but it wasn't what was most important to me at the time. I wanted to go home, get my homework done, and go outside to play—that was most important.

Even though school wasn't the biggest part of my life back then, I did enjoy going to school. Growing up, we weren't allowed to hang out with our friends outside of school, so I never went over to my friends' houses. School was the only time I got to see my friends and play with them, so that made me love school. I started seeking out friends that were very similar to me during third grade. I wanted friends who would do their work, not get in trouble, and make good grades. That's when I started hanging around Jackson, a White kid who became my best friend, and the rest of the gifted group. That group, made up entirely of White kids except for me and another Black boy, AJ, was super competitive when it came to schoolwork. We really just wanted to prove to each other how smart we were, or at least how smart we thought we were! I just wanted to be around people who were similar to me with the same mild-mannered temperament. If I realized someone I was friends with started getting into trouble, then I would make sure I didn't hang out with them much anymore. I didn't want anyone thinking I was a troublemaker! Even at that young age, I had an understanding of the different social dynamics in a classroom, and so I naturally sought out my own people. And that core group of people remained the same throughout elementary school.

Thinking back on those early days with Jackson, I remember we met because he played playground football with some of my Black friends from my neighborhood. I didn't play, but I liked watching my friends play. Jackson was always so funny! He talks with this crazy thick southern drawl, and it takes him forever to say one sentence! But he

loved to crack jokes—not in a mean way—and making other people laugh was something that made him happy. Once we were in the same class, I could see how smart he was, but he was definitely someone who was only going to do exactly what he needed to do to get by. He was confident in his abilities, but he was never competitive. I remember asking him about that once we got to middle school and he said something like, “Why would I work harder than I have to? I know that I can do the work, so I don’t need to bust my tail trying to show others that I can do it.” I didn’t really understand that laid-back attitude at the time, but now, looking back, I wish I could relax about school a little bit but maybe not quite as much as Jackson!

My sister and I, even though we were twins, were never in the same class in elementary school. My mom said that was intentional. She didn’t want us to have that “competing siblings” dynamic in class. She knew we each had our own abilities, and she treated us each as a separate person. I think she dressed us similarly one time while growing up, though. But it was only once! But for Bea, things just didn’t come as easily for her as they did for me, you know? I would just soak up information like a sponge, but it was more of a struggle for her. Once teachers started to realize the differences between us when it came to academics, we met with a counselor who did a good job of letting us know about our differences and sometimes things take a little more work for other people. Sometimes kids are slower at getting information and being able to use that information. Because of that counselor, and because my parents were so supportive in our individual abilities, our academic differences never seemed odd to me.

I always felt like my elementary teachers, all of whom were White, were really nice, and I thought they were the smartest, kindest people in the world. I revered them,

especially my third-grade teacher. Why can't I remember her name? She was really young and seemed relatable to us students. She created a classroom environment that was conducive to having us kids work together and allowing us to highlight our voices through writing workshops. If I remember correctly, our class was a mix of Black students and White students, but there were definitely more boys than girls. In that class, I wrote, a lot, and discussed with my peers what I wrote and how I was working through the writing process. We peer-reviewed each other's writing all the time. I preferred to work independently, but if I had to work with other students in a group, I didn't want to be the leader. I didn't want to be the one to make sure that the group was on task because I feared getting in trouble for being in an off-task group. If I was with my friends like Jackson and AJ, I knew we would get the work done and I would enjoy working with a group, but I just didn't want to get in trouble, even if it was second-hand trouble where I was guilty by association! I totally feared getting my name on the board for misbehavior because then my mom might find out and she would be so disappointed in me! Jackson and AJ were pretty straight-laced like me, and they didn't like getting in trouble, either, so I knew they wouldn't do anything that would cause the teacher to reprimand us like she did that all-girl group of Black and White girls that was always super loud! One time, the teacher actually separated all of those girls and put each one into a different working group. I was glad that my group didn't end up with one of those girls!

Our middle school started with fifth grade and used the team method to put a group of students with four core teachers. Those of us on the team, there were about 100 kids, were only in classes with each other and we had the same four academic teachers. That fifth-grade year, most of the kids on the team, maybe 70%, were White and the rest

of the team were Black students. Wait! I remember that there was one Hispanic student, Izabella, who was in a couple of my classes. *(This is supported by the overall racial makeup of the school when Wayne was in fifth grade: approximately 27% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 70% White.)*

When I moved to the middle school from elementary school, the only friend on my team was Jackson. But then Jackson introduced me to a few other friends like Chance and Wyatt, both White, all of whom were gifted. I was not officially gifted yet. That fifth-grade year was when I started to realize that I was a bit different from my peers, both Black and White, with regards to academics. I remember being in Miss Howard's social studies class, which was a good mix of Black and White students, and the work was just so easy—it wasn't challenging at all. Her work never stressed me out, but for most of the other kids in that class, Black and White, it was a different story. They really seemed to be struggling with the concepts we were being taught. I wasn't quite sure why they were struggling, but it didn't make me think any less of them. That year, there was also a reading class, and the class period I was in was labeled "honors" while most of the other students on my team of 100 students, except the gifted kids like Jackson and Chance, were in regular reading classes. That's when it started clicking with me that other students were struggling with this fifth-grade work, and I wasn't. My only real challenge that year was math, and that's been the case my entire life!

Speaking of math, that's just one subject I never could get, you know? I mean, I rocked those times table tests, mainly because I memorized all of the facts, but once we actually applied those multiplication facts to real problems, I just struggled. I would rather read a nonfiction book about the Revolutionary War or watch a historical

documentary on TV than work on math problems. I was never really told that I wasn't a good math student, but starting around fifth grade, I just didn't feel like one. I remember being a little jealous of AJ, who, like me, wasn't officially identified as gifted until sixth grade, because he was a math whiz! I don't think there was ever a math problem that kid couldn't solve! My classmates and I would look on with amazement when AJ went to the board to solve a problem. I didn't talk to AJ about this until we were in high school, but when I asked him how he got so good at math, he said, "Math just comes easy to me. My mind is constantly trying to solve problems and solving problems is fun." I never thought of math as being fun; it certainly never was for me!

In sixth grade, regular [general education] kids, both Black and White, who were smart and hard-working but not technically "gifted" like me and AJ, were allowed to start taking gifted classes for science and social studies. I knew a few of the kids in those classes, like Jackson, but I quickly became a member of that whole cohort of friends. Here I was, this Black kid who wasn't gifted, but that group of White gifted kids welcomed me right in. There were several new, non-gifted kids, Black and White, that were in those classes that year, and I remember Mr. Greggs, the social studies teacher, working hard to make it a welcoming environment. He was like, "Okay, there are some new kids in here this year. We are going to support them the best that we can." I definitely felt like I was behind because everyone else was in these higher-level classes for years, and I knew I needed to catch up with them. All of those White gifted kids were super nice, super creative, very inviting to all of us non-gifted kids, very outgoing. And so that made it easy for the newbies like me to fit in. We became a solid cohort of friends, and it remains that way today, 4 years after graduation.

That year, sixth grade, the non-gifted academic teams--I was on Theta that year--started offering advanced math and ELA classes because those subjects didn't have a gifted version like science and social studies did. I was in an advanced ELA class in sixth grade, and our [White] teacher was amazing! She created a super-collaborative environment, allowing us to work together to get things done. Jackson and Chance were in my advanced ELA class, so we usually worked together. I think that's when our clique of gifted and advanced non-gifted students really started to gel and solidify because we were together pretty much all day. By the way, I did not take an advanced math class! I knew what my weaknesses were!

Later that 6th-grade year, we took the ITBS [Iowa Test of Basic Skills] and CogAT [Cognitive Abilities Test] assessments. I remember there was a verbal reasoning section of the test, which, basically was like a mini-SAT! It wasn't like other tests I had taken, and I remember thinking it was weird because I knew at that time that my strength was social studies, and I wasn't able to show my social studies knowledge on that test. I guess I did well because shortly after the ITBS, I took this crazy test where I had to draw. Apparently that test was designed to measure my creativity, but I didn't know what to do with the bean shape on one page and the 100 circles on another page. Some of the gifted kids told me about this test, and I knew it was important for getting into the gifted classes, but when I was taking it, I just thought, "I don't know how to be creative with this! It's just a bean shape!" I remember getting so far into my head, thinking about what I needed to do to show I was creative. It wasn't as easy as it should have been because I was so focused on trying to be creative. If I remember correctly, I just made lots of smiley faces and maybe drew some planets or something. On the page with all of the

dots, I drew some boxes and stick figures. Even today, I'm still a little anxious even thinking about what I needed to do with that little bean shape and all of those dots!

Not long after that crazy bean test, I took home a letter that I believe changed the trajectory of my educational career. The letter said I made it into the gifted program. It was a really big deal! I mean, my family always told me that I was smart and that I could even go to Harvard if I wanted to, so this was really validation for that. My mom told me, "Yeah, I told you that you could do it," and told everyone who would listen about my getting into gifted! I loved how proud my mom and grandparents were of me! And I was like, "Okay, I finally get to be in the gifted classes for real! I get to be a part of the crowd that I wanted to be a part of!" I was just so excited, not just because of the kids who would be in my class, but because I really loved learning, especially social studies. Fifth grade social studies was so boring, so I really looked forward to being in a more challenging social studies class. I think that year was when I really began to learn how to think critically, and I really enjoyed that. I needed that opportunity to be pushed, and I got that in my gifted classes.

Sixth grade is definitely when I noticed that my friend groups were changing drastically because of the people that I was exposed to. And my brother Shawn even made notice of it. He was like, "Why are you acting so different? You're acting White, man. It seems like you been changing since you been in those gifted classes. A lot of your friends are different, too." I asked Shawn what exactly I was doing to "act White," and he started naming a laundry list of behaviors of which I was unaware. He told me that my clothes were White because instead of wearing baggy jeans and hoodies, I wore fitted khakis and collared shirts. I didn't wear Nikes and instead wore loafers. I would rather

stay inside doing homework or reading a book instead of going outside to play football or just hang out with the neighborhood Black kids. Shawn told me that I didn't talk like him or his Black friends and that I sounded like I had a White accent. When I asked him to explain this to me, he couldn't. All he could say was that I always talked really proper and never used any slang words. I did not realize any of this until Shawn threw it in my face. I wasn't angry at him or embarrassed for myself; I was just sad because Shawn, my big brother, sounded so disappointed in me. I never wanted to disappoint anyone, especially anyone in my family. I never noticed that I was acting any differently once I started taking gifted classes. There weren't any other Black kids in those classes with me other than AJ, so it wasn't really an intentional decision on my part in order to just be friends with White students. I guess maybe I was just acting like the new friends I was with every day, but I didn't take acting like my new [White] friends as a negative. Not at all. That conversation with Shawn made me mindful of my actions but it didn't change the way I acted after that.

After my brother told me I was acting White, I thought about my friend AJ, the only other high-achieving Black kid in my classes. He dressed more like Shawn than I did, but I don't remember AJ getting in trouble for baggy pants like my brother did! AJ joined the middle school football team in sixth grade, which was another difference between him and me, so he would wear a nice shirt and khakis on game days like the rest of the football players, but the rest of the week he wore t-shirts and jeans. As for the way he talked, AJ was very quiet in class, mostly talking only in math class where he knew all of the answers. I'm not sure how he acted when he was around his football friends, who were mostly Black, but in class, he sounded very much like me.

Another thing I remember about sixth grade is failing a test for the very first time. In fact, I never failed anything before that test; I never even made any grade lower than a B! It was the first test I took in Mr. Greggs' gifted social studies class and it was a totally jarring and humbling experience. It still feels like it was just yesterday when we were reviewing for that test on the Cuban Revolution, and I knew the material! I learned all of the vocabulary words, I knew all of the important people and dates, I could tell you about the Cuban Missile Crisis, but when Mr. Greggs put that blank test down on my desk in front of me, I just froze. Where were the vocabulary words and matching definitions? Where were the fill-in-the-blank sentences where I could write in the names of Castro and Khrushchev? All I could see were short answer questions where I was expected to create my own answers instead of just pulling a vocab word from a word bank. I never saw a test like this before. I turned the page over and there staring back at me was the first essay question I had ever seen on a social studies test. I always considered myself a good writer, but I didn't even know where to start, even after I read the question over and over again. I started feeling sick, like I was going to throw up, and I wanted to cry. How could I tell my mom and granddad, who knew I was taking the test that day, that I was certain I failed it? This was going to be bad.

And it was. Seeing that F at the top of my returned test a few days later made me feel like maybe I didn't belong in classes with those gifted kids after all. But Mr. Greggs was just so supportive. He told me, "It's just an F. It's not going to define you. Let's just pick it up and do better next time." And I did. On the very next social studies test, I made an A. I studied like I always did, making flashcards and having my mom or grandpa quiz me, but I also read my notes over and over again and talked with my grandpa about

everything related to Latin America (our next unit of study) so that I knew I really understood the material and could talk and write about it. I took making that F as a challenge, and I will always take on a challenge. When Mr. Greggs put that next test down on my desk, I felt confident that I could take it on and beat it, which I did. I felt such a sense of pride in myself, and I loved that feeling! Once again, I thought of myself as a strong social studies student, a feeling I missed after bombing that first test!

Every single one of my middle school teachers, Mr. Greggs included, pushed me and my classmates to challenge ourselves, to do more than rote memorization and basic skills. I find myself wanting that for my students today. It's like, "I'm not giving you information just because. I'm giving you information because it's going to benefit you later. And I want you to be challenged by that, think critically about that." I credit my middle school teachers with that drive to push my current eighth-grade students beyond what they think they can do, and I am so appreciative of them.

Mr. Greggs was a big believer in project-based learning. We completed this economics project in his class that was my favorite school project ever. It was a life project where we chose a career and planned it out to the T. We had to figure out what our lives would be like working in our chosen career, and we had to be very specific. We actually got quotes from insurance companies to see if our career would allow us to even have insurance! Man, I was only 11! But it was a fun project and it helped to set my goals where they needed to be and where I wanted them to be. I just knew I was going to go to this amazing school in Florida and get a degree in sports medicine so I could become a sports technician for one of those sports-drink companies. That's not quite how things turned out for me, career-wise, but that project really opened my eyes to thinking about

the real world. None of the non-gifted social studies classes did that project, so I hate to think of what I would have missed out on if I hadn't been in Mr. Greggs' class.

Looking back, it really stands out to me that once I started taking those advanced and gifted classes, I wanted to start dressing the part. I begged my mom to buy me Sperry deck shoes, khakis, and polo shirts so that I could blend in with my White gifted peers. I don't think it was really about wanting acceptance from anyone but more about projecting an image of being a smart young man who was serious about school and his future. Most of my Black peers just wore jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies every day; my own brother got suspended in high school for letting his pants sag, which was against the dress code. I definitely stood out from my brother and my Black peers. But, to me, that was a positive. Now I wonder what they (*Black peers*) thought about my dressing so differently from them. Or if they even cared at all.

Our school system got a new superintendent during my 7th-grade year, and he decided that even more students should be allowed to take higher level, more challenging classes. That shouldn't be just a perk for the gifted kids. So, the classes labeled "gifted" were abolished, and the Explore program was implemented. This program would allow a whole team of approximately 125 high-achieving students per grade level to take advanced and honors classes with the same core group of five teachers. This way, more students would be challenged in their academics through varying levels of courses, such as advanced and honors classes. When we found out about this new program at the end of seventh grade, I was really excited. I remember thinking, "Wow! We're getting a completely smart team!"

The night of open house, which was the week before school started, I was so excited to see old friends like Jackson, AJ, and Chance, but was even more excited to see Brock (*a Black fellow band member*), Sammy (*an Asian student from computer science class*), and Raul (*a Hispanic student from the neighborhood*) walking the same halls I was, looking for our homeroom classes. I knew those guys from outside of my academic classes but now here they were, getting ready to take advanced and honors classes with us (*identified gifted students*). Within the first month of eighth grade, there was a lot of camaraderie that developed between the kids that were in the gifted classes before and the new kids. There was almost a “We’re happy to have you on board” feeling from us gifted kids towards the new kids. We helped them learn what to expect, especially since those of us in the gifted classes already knew three of our eighth-grade teachers from the year before. Brock even thanked me for that after the first report cards came out. He told me that he didn’t think he would have earned all A’s and B’s if kids like me and Jackson didn’t prepare him.

One of the best parts of our new team was the diversity of the students. I was no longer one of only two Black students in the higher-level classes! I always knew there had to be more of us (*Black students*) out there! There were also Hispanic and Asian students in those classes, and I relished the diversity those students brought to the classroom. Not only were the Explore students set apart from the rest of the school, but those of us that went through gifted experience before were considered the cream of the crop. That was a really good feeling, a huge sense of pride, and that was a really good year. (*During Wayne’s eighth-grade year, there were 119 students on his Explore team.*)

This included approximately 64% White, 29% Black, 4% Hispanic, and 3% Asian students.)

High school meant things changed yet again. We got to pretty much choose our classes, and I always went with the classes that were labeled as the most difficult. I felt like that was what I needed to do to set myself apart from others. Maybe there was a bit of a superiority feeling there, but I wanted to take advantage of every honors class that I could because that's what other people, like my mom, grandpa, teachers, and I expected of me up to that point. Starting my sophomore year, I chose to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes instead of dual enrollment classes with the local technical college. I remember Richard, this senior whom I really looked up to, told me that colleges would care more about AP because it would show that you were working hard and trying to prove yourself. That sealed it for me: I decided to do AP because it would challenge me, but I also knew I could do it. Plus, I wanted to differentiate myself from the common student body. At that time, very few Black students were taking AP classes; I wanted to stand out as a Black student who was up for the challenge AP would bring. I wanted to be around others who lived for the challenge, which drove me to take that challenge, too. And I did, taking five AP courses during my high school career. I loved them all except for AP Chemistry. Man, AP Chem almost killed me!

Because of the new flexibility my friends and I had when it came to choosing classes, most of us really just became friends in passing. Even though we were a really competitive group, lots of my core group of friends like Jackson and Chance decided to take dual enrollment classes, which was maybe an easy way out, so I just didn't see them as much as before. I was on campus all day taking my honors and AP classes, and they

were off campus at the technical college for dual enrollment, so we really only hung out on the weekends. My friend group shifted a bit to the kids I was in classes with, some of whom were new to the school system, and that was okay. I was still around kids who wanted to be challenged to do their best, which was the expectation my grandparents instilled in me back when I was younger.

Even though my classes were mostly made up of White students, I know there should be more Black students enrolled in those classes. I didn't really have many Black friends growing up, so when a Black kid showed up in one of my honors or AP classes, I would think, "Man, this kid should have been in the gifted classes with us to begin with but here they are, finally getting exposed to AP-style classes because they decided they wanted to do that themselves." But a lot of times, those students would drop out of those higher-level classes because they just weren't prepared to jump into that level class like those of us who took tough classes for years. How unfortunate that was for them; it actually makes me sad to think about.

I'm just hypothesizing here, but I think part of the reason there weren't more Black students in my classes boils down to opportunity and support. My family provided me with tremendous opportunities and they were so supportive, but that's not always the case for other Black people in my hometown. Parents are working 24/7. Moms don't get to sit with their kids and make sure that they got their homework done. Grandparents aren't going to sit there and make sure it gets done. They don't have someone to teach them how to fill out college applications or financial aid forms. From the beginning, my parents and grandparents showered me with that support. I can't say that for a lot of my Black classmates. They had to wonder where their next meal was coming from; I didn't.

And because I didn't need to worry about that, I could put that energy towards school, towards building a social profile that fit where I wanted to go with my life. I don't know how to solve that issue, but a solution needs to start somewhere.

Oh, as a freshman, I decided I wanted to become involved in student government. I didn't just want to be a member; I wanted to be the ninth-grade class president. Go big or go home, right? So, I ran and won, and I started attending the monthly meetings. Just seeing the leadership in those meetings—the older students taking charge, leading meetings, and planning out what we would do as a group—really empowered me. I wanted to be a part of that going forward, too. I always aspired to be the leader in the room after that because of guys like Bryan (*a Black gifted student*) and Jonathon (*a White gifted student*) that came before me. I admired their leadership skills and I wanted to be like them, so I began to refine my leadership skills.

Being in the gifted program tremendously influenced me to step in and be a leader. Being in gifted and being around the type of students led me to value the leadership values I saw in those guys. It was their charisma, the way they spoke, the way they carried themselves that led me to that. And that was all because I was around them and was able to associate with them. I don't think I would have been exposed to or would have valued those things if I hadn't been in a gifted class. Even if all of those students I admired weren't technically identified as gifted, they carried themselves in the same way of those labeled as gifted. We all thought of ourselves as future doctors, lawyers, and governors. We wanted to be the way makers in society.

Don't get me wrong—high school was no cake walk. There was a lot of stress coming at me all the time. The weight of carrying the thought that I needed to be

successful in order to get on colleges' radars, to get into the top colleges...that was heavy. Plus, seeing that my brother and sister were struggling, knowing that I was a bit more academically successful than they were, that just added to it. I knew I needed to be even more successful because if I wasn't, then I might disappoint my parents and my grandparents. I needed to continue living up to the label placed on me—high achieving. That really came to define me.

Even though I was in classes with mostly White students once I started taking higher-level classes, I never felt like I was losing myself as a Black kid or that I was becoming disconnected from my cultural community because my family was so important to me and they kept me culturally grounded. My granddad and I would talk about what it was like being a Black man in his younger days and I never wanted to forget those struggles he described to me. If anything, I saw it as a positive that I became so embedded within another (White) culture through the classes I took and the friends I made because it helped me understand others. I definitely don't think I would have had that experience if it weren't for the gifted program.

I never, ever felt uncool being labeled as gifted or taking higher-level classes. I think in the school system I grew up in, there were so many people that went before us that I considered cool and were college-bound. Being in the same kinds of classes as Bryan, Richard, and Jonathon, all really smart but really popular and cool kids, put me at the same status so I never felt nerdy. The gifted program felt like a program for students that knew what they wanted to do with their lives. It was for students that wanted to go to a major university, not just the super-studious stereotypical smart nerd, so it was seen in a more positive light.

I can't imagine what my educational career and now post-graduate career would have been like if my parents said, "You know what? We don't want Wayne to participate in the gifted program. We think he's doing just fine going along in the normal classes." Things would have been drastically different. I wouldn't have the friends that I made and kept to this day. I wouldn't have had the experience to even think about applying to the best colleges in the country. I probably would have decided to stay at home and go to the local college, which would have changed the friends I made and experiences I had in college. I always knew I could do the work, that I was an advanced student, but having that gifted label helped push me to be the best student I could be and opened up opportunities to be successful. It certainly helped me market myself to colleges and I wore that label as an honor. Getting into the gifted program in sixth grade was life-changing, to say the least.

I absolutely believe that race played a role on all of my schooling experiences, both academically and socially. Even with my friends today, I'm the only Black person in my core friend group but I get to bring them a perspective that they can't bring to the group. I went to a predominately White university and was in an extremely White fraternity. There I got to bring not only the perspective of a Black student, but of a kid from rural Georgia, as well. I mean, there were one or two other Black guys in our fraternity, but they were from metro Atlanta, went to those super-rich schools, so they didn't share the same experiences I had. My high school career, where most of my classmates and friends were White, allowed me to be comfortable at a predominantly White university and in a predominantly White fraternity. I don't think I would have been comfortable joining a historically Black fraternity because I didn't have that intense

cultural connection and background. College is hard enough so I wanted to stay in my comfort zone, and I could do that by with my choice of both college and fraternity.

As for my future, I know exactly what I want to do with my life. I want to give back to the community that built me. So even when I was looking for my first job out of college, I was extremely calculated in finding the job that could build me into the educator I wanted to be in order to go back home to my community. I knew I wanted to stay at the school where I student taught, and I only interviewed one time to get the job. Yeah, I'm teaching in that wealthy district right now, but I want to see what makes that type of district tick before going back home and doing that for us (*his hometown's school system*). I think knowing that I am Black and from a rural school district who cares so much about bringing local talent home gives me the hope that when I become the superintendent of my home school district, I'll possess the know-how and community support to do an amazing job. I would be the first Black superintendent in our district but to me that wouldn't be a big deal because anyone with the same experiences could do the same thing.

Reflection

Wayne continues to struggle with the idea of returning to his small hometown to teach. During the summer after graduation, Wayne was offered an interview for a gifted eighth-grade social studies teaching position at his old middle school, teaching alongside his own former eighth-grade teachers. After much deliberation and prayer, he decided to decline the interview, even before another interview was lined up. While Wayne told me his decision was based solely on financial reasons, I got the sense that there was more to the story than just a paycheck. In all of his interviews, he was very positive about the

Liberty Valley School System, and it was evident that he respected his teachers, constantly seeking to make them proud. What would cause him to be apprehensive about returning home to teach in the gifted program he seemed to love and with teachers he admired as a student? I returned to my researcher memos and interview transcripts, looking for clues to help me find an answer.

As I sifted through pages and pages of memos, interview notes, and transcripts, I noticed that when Wayne would talk about his hometown community as a whole, his smile would fade a bit and his gaze would move to the floor. When he discussed his goal of becoming superintendent of the Liberty Valley School System, he perked back up, so I determined that it wasn't necessarily moving back home that Wayne wasn't sure about, but it was more about his position within the school system and thus, the community, that seemed to shake his confidence. In one of his interviews, Wayne mentioned that he felt a little too liberal for his conservative hometown, and that he was nervous about returning to such a community as a teacher. Perhaps having a position such as superintendent would make his liberal viewpoint a bit more palatable for the "uptight conservatives" he perceived as dominating the overall community.

Letitia

"Suddenly, I felt like I had something to prove as the lone Black student in those challenging classes."

Meet Letitia

Letitia, 24, is a petite Black female who currently works as a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) tutor at a Montessori school in her newly-adopted West Coast town. As Letitia lives primarily on the West Coast, her second of

three interviews was conducted via Zoom. The other two interviews were conducted in-person at the Starbucks in Letitia's hometown when she returned home for holidays. She prides herself on being a member of the LGBTQ community. A stick of dynamite in a small package, Letitia has never been one to shy away from using her voice.

After graduating from high school, Letitia initially attended a public state university where she majored in engineering. While in college, she partnered with her dad and started a car detailing business. However, a few family illnesses brought her back to her hometown and away from college life. Letitia continued to build her car detailing business, and in 2021, moved to Oregon with her partner. She now spends time alternating between living on the West Coast and in South Georgia in order to help take care of her aging parents and her autistic nephew.

Letitia's Story

I was born in this small rural town and was adopted by my parents as a baby. They were also both born and raised here, so that's why we stayed here. I have two younger adopted siblings and one older sister, who is my parents' biological child. She's the only non-adopted child out of the four of us. My mom, I believe, got a certification in teaching, or maybe an associate degree in teaching, from the college here. But that's as far as she went, education-wise, after high school. My father didn't go on to college after high school. He is a smart man, but he wasn't very academic...not academically gifted, I guess. My dad worked at a number of places. He worked at the post office, and then he went into the freight industry. My mom worked as a teacher in first and second grades for a while. Before that, I think she worked at the dry cleaners. Most of what my parents learned was gained through life experiences rather than in a classroom.

My sister, on the other hand, my older sister Francie, she loves school! I cannot tell you how many degrees and certifications she has! That was definitely a shift in the importance of education between my parents' generation and hers. My parents' main focus after high school was becoming financially stable enough to take care of their family and provide for themselves. More school wasn't really an option because it wasn't financially feasible. But my sister...she was different. Her main focus was continuing her education and getting into nursing school. She had other options like scholarships and my parents really pushed the importance of education on her. I don't know if she'll ever quit going to school. She just loves learning that much! Maybe once she finally opens the urgent care facility of her dreams, she'll take a break from school.

Then there's me. You could say that, as a child, I was different. I was always considered smart, I guess, but I was more creatively driven. I guess I was more intrigued by how things worked and by what I could destroy and put back together. My love of deconstruction and reconstruction started with me taking apart my brother's toys and trying to put them back together. My parents didn't find that amusing because they paid good money for those toys. I never really got in trouble for ruining his toys, but I did get stern lectures about the value of those toys. But, when there was something broken in the house, I would just be like, "Just give it to me. I got it." I think my parents thought if something was already broken, I couldn't make it much worse, so they'd give it me and I'd work on taking it apart. Sometimes I'd be successful, but most of the time, at least when I was younger, I wasn't so successful at repairing the things I took apart.

I also tried to see what I could get away with around the house before I would end up in trouble! I wanted to push the envelope but not all the way off the cliff. I was very

much a fireball and I had a very smart mouth. From a young age, I recognized my voice, I knew the importance of my voice, and I knew how to use it. Whenever I got into trouble, I would speak up and defend myself. I would also take up for my siblings when I thought they needed me to do so. You could say I was a justice-seeker from a young age, and I am still that way today. Whenever I deem that something is unjust, whether in my family or withing society as a whole, I begin thinking of ways I can fight that injustice. I was very adamant about who I was and what I wanted. I possessed strong opinions from a young age, and if I didn't want to do something, then I wasn't going to do it, plain and simple.

Growing up, my family was very mild mannered and family-oriented. We took a lot of trips and vacations. Probably the best vacation was the trip we took to Panama City . . . no, wait . . . it was when we went to Busch Gardens in Tampa for my sixth birthday. I remember my dad waking me up super-early, like around 6:00, on my birthday to take me to the 24-hour arcade at the park. I had a Bratz Doll birthday cake, and someone, maybe an aunt or uncle, gave me this huge hot-pink gorilla from one of the park's gift shops. That was a great birthday! We also loved going to Destin, being on the beach, and eating at Emeril's Coastal restaurant. We still take some good trips, even though my parents now tend to go off gallivanting across the country by themselves, but my favorites will always be the ones we took when I was younger. We always liked to have a good time when we were together, and those trips gave us the opportunity to do so.

There was never much arguing, fussing, or fighting in our family. If there was an argument, it was over something small like me or my siblings asking my parents, "Why

can't I go outside?" or "Why can't I hang out with my friends?" There wasn't any big rifts in our family so our house was normally calm. One thing I will say, though, is that my parents always made sure that my siblings and I saw the world and weren't confined to just the limits that our small town provided. My house was a nurturing environment. If there was something me or my siblings wanted to do, my parents tried to make sure they had the means to explore the option and then do it, like when Francie was ready to go to college or when I got the chance to go to Washington, D.C. in middle school. It was only on rare occasions did our parents say no to something when it came to us expanding our horizons.

As I got older, I began to see that my parents didn't get the same opportunities as kids that they were giving to me and my siblings, and I knew there would be more options, especially regarding education, out there for me than there were for them. I guess as a child, I knew that education was important, but my parents were fine with the education that they had, or maybe didn't have. I thought they were always doing good. I look back now, though, and think that even though they were doing okay financially while we were growing up, they could have done even better if they would have got a degree or something or pursued careers other than what they already knew. But they did the best they could, and they supported us and loved us unconditionally. In all, my childhood was happy. I can't say that anything in my homelife was bad.

Oh, man, I loved starting school! School was so exciting because I just like learning new things, and when I first started school, almost everything was new. School opened up infinite possibilities for learning and I couldn't wait to get started! Probably my earliest memory of school would be that my grandmother had just made me a dress

for the first day of school. It was like a picnic-style red and white checkerboard dress with shorts to wear underneath it. That was the first and last time I wore that dress. I just wasn't a dress-wearing kind of girl! My first school, Four Acres, was like a Montessori preschool that was based on the development of the child in all areas such as social, day-to-day life, hygiene, etc. The teachers set up stations where you could play in the kitchen and learn what a microwave did and how a pretend stove worked. The boys and girls, Black and White, loved playing in that pretend kitchen! We also participated in art, music, and reading...the normal school-type subjects. That school really got kids ready to go on to kindergarten and first grade.

Before I even went to Four Acres, though, I was asking to skip ahead to first grade. I learned how to read really early, around two or three, so I thought I was ready for first grade. My mom bought a collection of those little starter easy-reader books that I read through in record time. Then, in preschool, I was ready to read more. It was like I just couldn't get enough books into my hands! The teachers didn't just stop me at the easy books, thankfully. If I wanted to read something other than the easy books, they made it happen. My teacher would say, "Okay, you're advanced. This is what you want to read, and we aren't going to hinder your growth. Go read those second and third grade level books!" That always made me feel so accomplished, yet I think that was the beginning of the competitiveness I've always felt within myself. Forget what everyone else was or wasn't able to read; it was all about me! I loved knowing that I didn't have to read what everyone else was reading!

It was my mom that really got me ready for school. She was big on education and making sure we all excelled and did our very best in school. She read to us as babies and

young kids, and she made sure that we understood the concept and importance of books and stories. Man, I loved sitting on her lap, listening to her read to me. I can still picture our bookshelf just stuffed to the gills with books! Picture books, easy readers, chapter books, encyclopedias, dictionaries...all sorts of books! It's amazing that the thing never fell over on us kids. I think providing her kids access to books was so special to my mom because neither of her parents were educated past the fourth or fifth grade and books just were not a priority in her home growing up. So, she really pushed us to learn as much as we could and to do as well as she knew we could do. I credit her with preparing me so well for school.

Once I left Forest Acres, I started elementary school and made a lot of friends, both Black and White. We were all just kids back then, playing and learning together, and there wasn't really any divisiveness between us. Our major concerns were "What snacks are we eating today? Who's the line leader? Who's going to start playing tag?" Our worries were little things; we were, what I considered, very normal. I don't think we felt pressured like little kids do today. We definitely weren't very high maintenance, either! I guess there was a bit of racial divide back in elementary school because I remember having friends who were friends with kids of other races and their parents would tell them their friends couldn't come over to the house, and sometimes would even forbid their children from socializing with kids from other races. I definitely remember that. I also remember my parents telling me that there were certain people I shouldn't be friends with because their parents were racist or because their parents didn't associate with people of "our" kind or "our" (*Black*) color. It wasn't so much amongst the children, but it was amongst the parents. Back then, at that age, children weren't really opinionated

about people's races. They only knew what their parents were saying, and sometimes those things were about race.

During elementary school, I really enjoyed learning new things, especially in math and science. It was really easy for me to recognize patterns in both of those areas and figure out how things work. That just kinda came naturally to me. I remember getting bored after being on the same subject for a while. I'd be like, "Okay, I got this. I don't know why the rest of the class can't get it, but could we just move on?" This happened until fourth grade when I finally realized that I was getting things and everybody else wasn't. I was understanding much more material than most of my counterparts were understanding, and I could easily see the difference in learning capabilities between me and most of my classmates. I think that's when I realized I may have been gifted, even if I didn't know that term at the time.

In fourth grade, we still got our Friday Folders, a blue paper folder that we took home each week that contained newsletters, our graded work from that week, and other pieces of communication from the school for our parents. One Friday, my teacher, who was White, put an envelope containing book fair change in my blue folder and said, "Make sure you let your mom know that there is money in your folder, okay?" Well, me being me, I asked, "Why can't I let my dad know?" She just stared at me for a moment, so I continued, "Yes, I do have a father." I think she said something like, "Okay, then," and moved on to the next student's desk. I don't know what possessed me to say that; I guess I thought she was stereotyping me by assuming I was fatherless, and I wanted to prove her wrong.

Also in fourth grade, I remember one of the White boys in class, Wyatt, picking on me. Maybe it was about my hair, which I wore in skinny little braids, or it could have been about how tiny I was, but he just would not leave me alone. He picked on me in the classroom, on the playground, and on the way to the cafeteria. In the beginning, I would tell my teacher, but when nothing changed, even after she talked to Wyatt, I decided to let my mom know. So, one day after school when I got off the bus, I told her about Wyatt picking on me for a while at school. I can still see her frowning and hear her sighing before she said, “Well, you can’t really expect too much from Wyatt. His parents don’t like Black people and they’re racist, too.” She hugged me and continued, “Just don’t fool with him or his friends so his parents won’t get involved. They don’t really tolerate our people.”

That experience with Wyatt and the conversation with my mom that followed was the first time I remember internalizing the term “our people”. Thinking about that term now that I’m older, it’s a little bittersweet. I mean, there’s a pride in being Black and in the Black community as a whole, but it also just illuminates the divisiveness between Black and White. It’s a reminder of all of the oppression and the obstacles Black people faced in the past and continue to face, even in 2022. I think I’ve just gotten to that point where, when I hear the term “our people”, I’m just like, “Well, this is just the way it is. What can I do, bleach my skin? I’m proud of my skin color and my Black community, so just screw it.”

When fourth grade was finally over, I moved on to the middle school. After that transition, there was definitely more of a divide between races. Black children just started forming our own cliques within the classrooms; we were basically segregating ourselves

from the White students in the room. This wasn't a subconscious segregation, either. Kids would say things to me like, "You can't swim because you're Black" or "Ooh, your skin is so dark." At the time, I guess you don't really think too much of those comments, but when you get older, it's like, Wow, okay, that was definitely racist and definitely not okay. As a child, it's kind of like one of those "Na-nanny-boo-boo" type of things. It doesn't get to you psychologically then, and you don't really see the big picture of how it affects you. I can see it now, though. It wasn't just kids being kids; it was a form of racism.

It took me getting tested four or five times just to get considered for gifted classes. Plus, my mom met with my teachers just so I could be considered for testing. I think that's really the first time when racism was so apparent to me. All of these White kids in my class were getting gifted letters, but I wasn't. Finally, in sixth grade, I found out I was officially gifted, and my family was really proud! Even though she was older, Francie and I would help each other with homework, and she was always very supportive of me. But right when I got into the GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) classes, it became clear that there weren't any other Black children in those classes. It was just me. Suddenly, I felt like I had something to prove as the lone Black student in those challenging classes. I mean, I was friends with some of these (*gifted White*) kids for years, but I often felt like I stood out, which could sometimes make me feel lonely. Plus, I would see my Black friends who weren't in gifted classes building relationships and making connections with each other, but I couldn't do that because I spent all day in gifted classes with only White people. I felt a little separated and like I was losing my

connection to the Black community, and I began to miss that feeling of kinship with those Black friends.

That's when my friend group started to change. As soon as I got into GATE, the Black kids at school would be like, "Oh, well, she's in classes with all the White people, so she probably doesn't want to associate with us." I wanted to be with the people who looked like me, but because of the opportunities I was getting, it was made to seem like I was detaching or distancing myself from my Black friends, but that wasn't the case. At least, it wasn't intentional. I constantly wondered if I was Black enough to remain part of the Black community, if I was too Black for the circumstances I was in, and that was really tough for me.

I was also having identity problems, almost an identity crisis, during this time, as well. I thought, Maybe since I'm with these people, these White people, I need to start acting more White or, you know, not as Black. So, I paid more attention to my diction, the slang I used or didn't use, the way I talked. I started straightening my hair, I got bangs, for crying out loud...that was a terrible phase! I didn't even listen to any hip-hop or rap music then. What in the world was I thinking? I think you just start acting like who you are around, and I was pretty much around White kids all day, every day. Looking back on it, I can see that I was turning my back on who I really was. That didn't really change until 8th grade when I started getting back to my roots. I think that participating with the high school band, which was much more diverse than our middle school band, helped with that. The older Black kids that were in band helped me feel like, "Hey, you can be smart and still hang out with your Black friends. It's okay. You can probably teach them a thing or two." I mean, I didn't automatically just change back to the Black girl I

used to be all at once (that happened more in college), but it was a start. If I could go back to that time when I was trying to be anything but Black, I would do things so much differently. I would wear my curly natural hair, no bangs, with pride!

In elementary school, the group of friends that I would sit with and work with was predominantly Black, but in sixth grade that changed. I stopped sitting with those friends and started sitting with my friends from GATE, who were White. I even stopped talking to my Black friends because they weren't really into what I was into such as math, science, and making good grades, but my friends from GATE were. It seemed like it wasn't a conscious decision that I made, but, at the same time, it did. It was just something that happened naturally and eventually translated over to high school, where I didn't have any Black friends except for those in band. I would think, "I can't be that (*a typical Black kid*) because I'm surrounded by this (*a bunch of gifted White kids*). And this is how I need to act and what I need to be."

Even though I was young, I still remember the first time I was accused of acting White. I was in first grade, and we were doing a group project. I think we were organizing circles by colors or something easy like that. My group was all White except for me. One of the kids said, "No, no, no. We need to do it this way." I was like, "No, that's not right." One of the White boys, a teacher's kid, no less, in the group said, "Well, if you would just stop trying to talk so White, we could finish." Wait. What? "Hold on. Why do I have to be talking White just because I know how to do it?" I remember asking. That's when I got up on the table and proceeded to share with the rest of the class that I could be educated even if I was Black. That prompted my teacher to write a note in my folder stating, "Letitia was very feisty today." When I showed it to my mom, I started

trying to explain, but since my mom worked at the school, she already knew. It was okay, though, because once I told her the whole story, she knew that I was just standing up for myself. The boy that said that to me didn't get in trouble; in fact, the teacher just told us to get back on task. But I was the one labeled "feisty" by my teacher. Sounds fair, right?

First grade wasn't the only time I was accused of acting White. On several occasions, I was told that I was acting White and talking White because I hung out with a lot of gifted people who happened to be White and were into the things I was into. Other (*Black*) students weren't that interested in math, science, architecture, engineering, and robotics like the other gifted students and I were. Those subjects were considered to be nerdy and White and not something that Black people were predominantly into. And so to me, it was like, "Well, I can't be Black and still enjoy these subjects that I love—I can't be authentic to myself and my culture and still be part of the gifted program or be around my gifted peers." There was some serious internal conflict going on inside me, but since my academics were most important to me, I made the decision to tune out those people who didn't truly understand me. I've always been the type of person that doesn't really care what someone says about how I act or who I am because of the goals I want to achieve. I guess that attitude stuck with me because I'm still that way today.

One of the biggest things I noticed in middle school was that I didn't see a reflection of myself in my teachers. In middle school, there was one Black math teacher. Just one. I just didn't have any representation amongst the teachers. I feel like it must have been that way in elementary school, too, but it just didn't stand out to me as much as when I got to middle school. People can say that in education, everything's the same for everyone, but it's not. To see someone of color teaching you, to see them in that position

and just to know that it's okay not to be fearful of knowledge, well, that's important. The Black community struggles with accepting new ideologies and education as a whole so to see someone like me could made me think it's cool to be Black and a teacher. We (*Black people*) don't have to be in the streets or on drugs or however else they show us on TV, but since I didn't see a representation of myself in my teachers, I didn't see myself furthering my education or being as successful as my White peers.

My gifted teachers, though, tried their best to address my needs as a Black gifted learner. They focused on the general development of a gifted child and of helping gifted kids be the best they could be. I was challenged in a few classes, like fifth and sixth grade social studies with Mr. Kines and in seventh and eighth-grade English with Ms. Manning. Mr. Kines, he was very particular and very adamant that he knew we could do better than what we, at the time, thought we could do. Ms. Manning always pushed us to do more; she always had high expectations of her students and we wanted to meet those expectations. There could have been more challenge in other classes instead of just more homework, though. I mean, homework during the summer? Kids that weren't in gifted were blessed with a homework-free summer! But now, looking back, I appreciate that extra push into trying hard things, even if it meant failing, and of being expected to do a little bit more than the non-gifted students.

Just like there were no teachers that looked like me, there were no students in gifted who looked like me. I was the only Black kid in most of my classes, so I felt like I was drained of my voice, especially when we talked about topics such as slavery or racial issues and tensions. It felt like I couldn't really say anything because my voice was being drowned out by people who didn't look like me and who maybe didn't have the actual

facts about those topics. In literature, where every single one of my teachers was White, we didn't learn about or read a lot of Black poets or Black authors even though it helps you to understand yourself and your place in the world when you see yourself in others. That was hard. Here I was, this girl who had always felt she could say what was on her mind, but when it came to issues where I felt like I was in the minority, I couldn't bring myself to speak up. If I could go back and tell that middle school girl that her voice was just as important as her classmates' voices, I would do so in a heartbeat, even if it meant being called feisty or something worse.

About halfway through seventh grade, the dynamics in our gifted classes started to change. While we had all been fairly serious about school and classwork up to that point, things seemed to change after Christmas break that year. A handful of the kids that were in my classes for years seemed to no longer really care about working hard and getting good grades. Kids like Charlie, Owen, Andrew, Abbigail, and Mercy, all of whom were White, started goofing around during class, doing things like not turning in their homework or not pulling their weight when we were assigned groupwork to do. The boys were always doing stupid stuff to make the girls laugh. They would make faces when the teacher would turn her back to the class, they'd make smart remarks when the teacher asked a question...stuff like that. They started dressing differently, too. Only wearing name brand clothes and the girls even started wearing makeup! The rest of us were kinda dumbfounded; we didn't know what was happening. My friends Laney, Bella, Matthew, Steven, and I were still our same albeit nerdy selves, focused on making good grades and keeping the teachers happy. Those newly-minted cool kids even started hanging out with kids who weren't in gifted classes, choosing to eat lunch at different tables instead of

with the rest of us nerds like before. Things stayed like that all the way through high school. I think, if anything, that change in dynamics just brought my group of nerds and overachievers even closer than before.

Speaking of smart remarks . . . you know how I mentioned that I tend to have a smart mouth? I mean, I tried to be on my best behavior at school, but sometimes other kids just made that impossible. In my eighth-grade math class (where I was, of course, the only Black kid), Charlie, one of the kids who suddenly turned cool in seventh grade, took my mechanical pencil off of my desk. When I told him to give it back to me, he proceeded to throw it at me, hitting me in the back of the head. I was like, “Why did you do that? Give me back my pencil!” I got up and went to get it off the floor. I picked my pencil up, sat back down, and Ms. Hayes, my math teacher, said, “Letitia, you need to stay seated and focus on your work.” I responded, “But he stole my pencil! How is it my fault that he took my pencil, threw it at the back of my head, and you just going to let me get hit?” And she said, “Now you have detention.” I was like, “Ah, that’s nice. That’s just wonderful.” Here I was, getting in trouble for defending myself, just like back in first grade. Oh, and absolutely nothing happened to Charlie. He just kind of sunk down in his desk and stayed quiet. I did catch a smirk on that face of his, though, when Ms. Hayes wasn’t looking. Jerk.

I truly believe that the whole situation with Charlie would have been totally different if either Charlie or Ms. Hayes was Black. When you’re a minority, you can just kind of point out when someone else on your side needs your help . . . you can sense it. You can literally feel the vibrations coming off of them. It’s a shared look among the Black community, and minority communities in general, of, “Hey, this isn’t right.” We

know that we are the low men on the totem pole, and that sucks. Anybody can point out a Black woman who they think is just being loud, ignorant, and angry for no reason, but it takes another Black person to understand when a Black woman is just trying to defend herself. We (*Black people*) are taught these habits of survival, whether it be in random social settings or in confrontations with others. We're taught the need to survive based on our skin color from the time we're born until the time that we die. It's something that's just ingrained in us from birth. I remember my mom telling me at an early age, "You've got to remember baby, you Black. People are going to treat you differently because you're not White." That's why it would have been nice to have a Black teacher from time to time. Not that most of my White teachers weren't great, but it's hard for someone to truly have your back when they've never even tried your shoes on, much less walked in them.

High school was just ugh. In general, high school as a social experiment was just awful. It was a mentally exhausting and draining time for me. I wouldn't say it was all bad, but high school forced me to confront issues that I didn't want to deal with, such as my identity as a smart Black kid as well as my sexual orientation. Looking back on it now, I guess I needed to go through the depression and anxiety that I did back then so I could learn how to cope and become a better, less jaded person. At the time, though, high school really just sucked.

I will say, however, that being a gifted high school student was beneficial for me, academically speaking. It allowed me to get ahead on my college courses before I actually went to college. It gave me an opportunity to do a lot more curriculum-wise than if I would've just taken the basic classes. Because of the high school credits I earned in

middle school, I was able to take 10th grade English and 11th grade history as a freshman and that prepared me a lot more than if I didn't have the opportunity to get some of those classes under my belt. I was also able to take dual enrollment and AP classes to earn college credit since I my basic courses were out of the way. I did math, Spanish, and a history class at the local college, and I took AP Psychology, English, and biology at the high school. So, I was able to experience both of these options and be successful, and I don't know if that would be the case if I wasn't part of gifted.

Now, quite a few of the (*White*) gifted kids decided that the AP classes were too tough, so they chose to take the much-easier dual enrollment classes. Not Matthew, who ended up as our class valedictorian, or Steven, who was the College Board STAR student that year, but kids like Charlie, his best friend Owen, some of the other kids who were typically the slackers and class clowns in the group, they chose the easy way out. I don't know if they were steered in the dual enrollment direction by parents, teachers, or counselors, or if they made that decision all by themselves. But I do know that our AP classes were more serious and challenging than they would have been if those bozos were in there with those of us who were actually serious about learning and preparing for college. It was interesting that, even though those dual enrollment classes were notoriously easier than any honors or AP class offered on the high school campus, several of those cool gifted kids weren't even identified as honor graduates when we were seniors. But by then, I guess academic accolades didn't matter as much to kids like Charlie and his group of friends.

Throughout my school career, being labeled as gifted affected the social experience of school life. I really only socialized with people in gifted because that was

predominantly who was in my classes. Things were really cliquey with other groups of students, too, so I pretty much stuck with the same core group of friends all through school. We just stuck together, you know? Now that I'm older, I really see that as a positive thing because I was with like-minded people who were focused on their academic goals, and the people that you surround yourself with really affect your day-to-day life, right? I am thankful for my friends like Matthew and Steven that pushed me, in a non-competitive way, to do the best I could in my classes and to strive for excellence, even when I maybe didn't want to.

I guess it was about 2 years ago when I really began to understand just how much I do not think like anyone else. Sometimes I feel like I'm on a totally different level and there's this drive to do something with the knowledge I possess. I am a very analytical person . . . always have been. But at the same time, I'm very in tune with my emotions. Kind of like how artists see colors or musicians hear music. I see tremendous detail in everything around me, which is ironic since my current side hustle is detailing cars. I try to determine how things are structured and how things are built...what's the foundation and what are the layers? For me, it's easy to pick up various talents. Say you wanted to teach me how to shoot a bow and arrow. Well, for me, it would be really like going through all of the parts of the bow and all of the parts of the arrow in my head. I would think about the mechanics and the physics...if my arm is operating in a fixed position and the wind is moving at a certain speed, this is the force I need to use on the bow . . . these are the things going through my mind. Yeah, so my mind is very analytical and constantly picking things apart to see how something operates. Can you imagine me

trying to explain that to someone who wasn't gifted or talented in analytical thinking? I'd probably get so frustrated that I would lose my mind!

All of the skills I learned in gifted, like analytical thinking and confidence in trying new things, definitely helps me with the work I'm doing with my STEAM kids now. Those skills I learned in gifted sixth grade science through AP Biology stuck with me and now I can share them with the next generation of science nerds. Those skills [pause] you carry those with you. It's not something you ever lose. The gifted program made learning interesting, and that's what I'm trying to do for my students. It's not just busy work or PowerPoints all the time. It's learning from different perspectives and through different modes. A mix of hands-on, visual, auditory learning makes the knowledge accessible to more kids. The gifted classes I took were more about teaching students how to think instead of teaching random bits of information. I remember my seventh-grade English class where my teacher taught us how to analyze sentences and break down paragraphs. We diagrammed a sentence every week and I loved it! It really taught me how to analyze various situations, not even just in a text but also in real life. It teaches you how to think and learn, and that is a hard process to lose or forget.

The skills I learned in gifted make me feel obligated to give back to my (*Black*) community through education. That sounds kind of negative, but I don't mean it that way. I see it as a positive. It's the most important thing to me, to be able to know that, "Yes, while I am intellectual and can learn things quite easily, I need to share that with everyone around me, especially Black people." Being in gifted along with my love of learning gave me a sense of security and stability about who I was as a scholar, as a Black student who was also smart. At the end of the day, I know that wherever I go, I

have my smarts with me, and I want to share that with other Black people. Education is like a security blanket, and so many Blacks need that blanket.

I never regretted being in the gifted program or taking higher-level classes. Maybe if my personality wasn't so strong, if my character type was different, I may have some regrets. If I wasn't so strong-willed (or perhaps stubborn), I might have let those racist moments I encountered deter me from staying the course within the gifted program. Do I wish the gifted program was more diverse? Of course I do, not just so I'd have some Black classmates, but so that other kids like me could access the experiences and opportunities that I did. Those experiences allowed me the opportunity to lift up other Black students academically, both during my school career and after. Even though I haven't intentionally sought those opportunities, they've just seemed to find me, unexpectedly, and it really has given me a purpose in my life. If my parents kept me from participating in the GATE program, my education would not have been the same. In fact, I think that would have been a terrible decision on their part. I mean, I love to learn. I willingly watched nature documentaries as a child, for crying out loud! I wanted science experiment kits for Christmas and birthday presents! I would have been miserable if not for being in the gifted program.

I do give some credit to the gifted program for allowing me to be things that society says I shouldn't be because I am a Black female. I'm not supposed to be a high school graduate. I'm not supposed to be 24, single, and childless. I'm not supposed to be a business owner. I'm not supposed to be successful and certified in various areas of technology. There's so much I'm not supposed to be or do, yet here I am, defying the

stereotypes, and I think that having been in gifted White classes allowed me to develop the skills I need to keep defying those stereotypes.

Sometimes there are still (*Black*) people who are ignorant and try to exclude me from the Black community because it's like my culture, my so-called acting White culture, doesn't match up to their idea of what the Black culture is. There are often times when I feel like a square ball trying to fit into a round hole when I'm around other Black people in social situations. While I don't hear the term (*acting White*) directed towards me very much anymore, there are still some of the older generation Blacks that view me in that way. The Black grandparents and great-aunts and uncles aren't as progressive as Black people of my generation. Social media made it acceptable to be Black and love Taylor Swift, be Black and be educated, be Black and be successful. I wish things were that way when I was in school, but at least there seems to be a change in the air today. I mean, if Snoop Dogg can host a cooking show with Martha Stewart, isn't anything possible for Black people? And who would tell Snoop that he was acting White? Not me!

Reflection

Of all six participants, Letitia was by far the most animated and the most outspoken. It was easy to pick up on her anger and resentment towards racial stereotypes, racial injustice, and racial privileges. When talking about the incident with Charlie in middle school, as well as the times she was blamed for "acting White," her usually present smile would fade, being replaced by scowl. You could almost see the fire in Letitia's eyes when she discussed her personal encounters with systemic racism as well as those she presumes other members of the Black community faced. Letitia actually needed to stop talking and asked to take a short break from the interview when she

described feeling like a “square ball trying to fit into a round hole” whenever she was around other Black people. After 10 minutes or so, she indicated that she was ready to move on with the interview and thanked me for allowing her the time to regroup and get a handle on her emotions that for a moment, overwhelmed her.

Emmanuel

“Without a doubt, if it wasn’t for my gifted classes, teachers, and peers, I would have just been another statistic. Another Black guy in jail, probably a dropout and thinking that the only thing that mattered was sports.”

Meet Emmanuel

Emmanuel, 23, is a tall, slender Black man with a seemingly permanent 100-watt smile on his face. He still lives in the South Georgia town where he was raised, making it easy to conduct face-to-face interviews in my office. A devoted father to his 3-year-old son, whom he shares with his high-school sweetheart, Emmanuel works in the sanitation department at one of the county’s largest employers. He also volunteers as a coach for one of the area’s community football teams, having been a middle and high school football star himself.

Although Emmanuel was the first participant to return a contact form indicating interest in the study, he was extremely reserved in his interviews. It seemed as if he were uncomfortable talking about himself and sharing his stories. I asked more probing questions during Emmanuel’s interviews than in any of the others I conducted. After the second interview, I went through his interview transcripts with a questioning eye, looking for places where I could ask Emmanuel to clarify or add to his previous responses to my questions. This made our third interview last almost two hours, but I was finally able to

get him to open up and share his detailed stories. While Seidman (2013) described his personal approach as finishing all three interviews before analyzing the data, he did give researchers consent to do more explicit data analysis between interviews, if needed. Doing this allowed me to rethink how I would conduct the third interview and reassess the questions I planned.

Emmanuel's Story

I grew up in what I considered to be a normal family. There was me, my older brother, my older sister, my younger sister with special needs, my mom, and my stepdad. My real dad, my biological dad, wasn't really in the picture until I got to high school. My mom worked two jobs most of the time while my siblings and I were growing up. I remember her working as a cashier at a One Price store for a long time as well as working as a cosmetologist, too. She went on to nursing school and started working at a doctor's office when I was almost finished with high school. My stepdad worked two jobs, too. He worked for a local landscaping company putting down turf while also working as a maintenance man at a cleaning company here in town. He never went back to school after he graduated from high school but always told me that he expected me to be different.

We lived next door to my grandparents, my mom's parents, and we stayed with our grandma whenever Mom or my stepdad went to work. Some of our cousins lived nearby and they came to visit a lot. My siblings, cousins, and I tried to stay outside a lot and just do normal kid stuff. One time, we decided we were going to build an aquarium...I think it was actually my idea! Don't know where that came from, I think we were watching *Finding Nemo* around then and maybe we were into fish, but we took a plastic box, you know, like a Rubbermaid container, and took it to the creek to fill it up

with water. My cousin Lennie said we needed rocks in it, so we found some of those, too. We even used some of the gravel from Grandma's driveway. We never told her that, though, because we got in enough trouble for taking the storage container and filling it full of water.

It always seemed like I just stayed in trouble, even when I didn't mean to. Once, me and Lennie decided to go to the store that was right down the street from the house. We was maybe seven or eight. When our grandpa found out what we did, we both got one of the worst whippings ever. In fact, that was the only time my granddad ever whooped me! Lennie didn't follow me and my crazy ideas much after that. We was still cool, but he didn't want another whipping like that one. But I never got in as much trouble with anyone else like I did my stepdad. It was like he lived for me to get in trouble, and he was always looking for something to fuss at me about. Around fifth grade, I was outside and no other kids was around, so I just started picking up pinecones and seeing if I could throw them over the house. Maybe I was getting ready to play football or something, I don't know. There were always a bunch of pinecones in our front yard. So, I was throwing the pinecones and they would land on the roof or even miss the roof entirely, but I got one to go all the way over the house and then I heard the yell. I didn't know my stepdad was in the backyard raking up pine straw and that one pinecone that cleared the top of the house landed on his head. Well, that's what he said happened, but I never believed it. He gave me a whipping that rivaled my grandpa's whipping, but it was worse cause I didn't think I deserved it. After that, I just tried to stay out of my stepdad's way because I was tired of pissing him off with every little thing I did.

For various reasons, I was really excited to start school in kindergarten. I looked forward to getting away from home for part of the day so I could get away from my stepdad, talk to other people, and play with other kids. Besides my cousins, I wasn't really allowed to go over to friends' houses or play with anyone else, so I couldn't wait to be able to be around kids I wasn't related to. I don't really remember a whole lot about kindergarten, but I do remember first grade. First grade is when I met my best friend Jason. Even though he was White, we hit it off immediately and became fast friends. We got into trouble together for laughing, talking, and just playing around like little kids do. It was never serious trouble, but just enough to make Ms. Steele, our teacher, give us that look or tell us to settle down. Jason and I both liked math and were pretty good at it; we would compare our gold star stickers on our math work when Ms. Steele gave it back to us on Fridays. We were always together, whether it was in the cafeteria, in the classroom, or on the playground, and Ms. Steele would call us brothers since you never saw one of us without the other. That was true all the way through elementary school because we were in the same class every year.

Third grade is when you are supposed to learn your times tables, and our teacher Mrs. O'Rourke tried so hard to motivate us to memorize those facts. One thing she would do was have us play this game called Around the World. Everyone would stand up and then she'd go around the room, calling on students and giving them a multiplication fact. She timed each kid and if you either got the answer wrong or you didn't answer before her timer went off, you sat back down. Usually, me and Jason were the last two kids standing. We alternated on which one of us won each time we played that game.

Sometimes I would win and get to go to the treat box and sometimes Jason would win. No matter who won, though, we'd share our treat with the other. We was just that close.

I loved competing against Jason when it came to math. Whenever I would beat him, it would feel so good because he was such a math whiz! But then there was this time towards the end of third grade when everybody knew the times tables that we took a speed test. It wasn't Around the World; it was a paper-pencil test where we correctly solved as many multiplication problems as we could in like a minute. Jason and I sat next to each other, and we were both rushing through, trying to be the first one to finish. Right when I was going to turn my paper over and raise my hand, letting Ms. O'Rourke know I was finished, Jason's hand shot up in the air. He finished right before I did! I got so frustrated with myself, I grabbed my glasses off my face and twisted them so hard, I broke them. Jason stared at me and I stared at my glasses. Once my face stopped feeling so hot, I realized what I had done and knew I was going to get in trouble when I got home. I did get a whipping from my mom, but I beat Jason the next time we took a multiplication test. I never cared about competing with anyone else in math except for Jason, but it was always a friendly competition.

While I only competed with Jason in math, I suddenly started feeling competitive with myself and everyone else in sports. I was tall and was a fast runner, but the only time I played sports was at school or with my cousins in my front yard. But then in third grade, we participated in field day and it was like a switch got turned on in me. All of the classes in third grade competed against each other in different events like the three-legged race, kickball, and running. I was on the relay team and I wanted our class to win! Running around the PE field and hearing my classmates and teacher yell my name felt

amazing, and I wanted to win for all of them as well as for myself. My friend Tyrelle, who was in a different class, was right up with me as we rounded the curve heading towards the finish line the teachers set up. There was no way I was going to let him beat me! I turned up my speed and sprinted to the end, beating Tyrese and just falling out once I crossed the finish. Once I got up off the ground, Ms. O'Rourke and all of my friends were standing there around me, congratulating me on winning the relay. Man, that was a good feeling, and it was one I wanted to experience again.

Fourth grade was rough for me. Not school-wise but behavior-wise. Sometimes I would just get so angry I just couldn't function. It was like anything could make me mad, no matter how small: my sister taking too long in the bathroom, a kid cutting in front of me in the lunch line, it didn't matter. I would just go into angry mode at the drop of a hat. That year, my keyboarding teacher Ms. Byrd was probably my savior. Whenever she saw me getting angry, she would let me go into her office and squeeze this squishy set of dice that I know now were like stress relievers. I'd just sit in that dark office, squeezing those dice, and try to breathe slowly in order to calm myself down. Most of the time, it actually worked. In fact, the keyboarding teacher told my other teachers about it and whenever I'd start getting mad in my other classes, those teachers would write me a pass to Ms. Byrd's room and I'd just go into her office and find my dice.

In elementary school, some of my friends were Black and some were White. Of course, there was Jason, who was White and was my best friend, but I was also really good friends with Austin, a White kid who lived in Jason's neighborhood and was smart like we were. But I was also friends with Tyrell and Vontres who were Black and lived in my neighborhood. We would all play tag or football during recess, and we all got along,

but Tyrell and Vontres just weren't into school like Jason, Austin, and me. That was okay because I knew that not everyone was as serious about academics as I was; I just liked having friends that I had fun with. I don't really remember having friends that were girls back then, but once I started noticing them in middle school, that changed!

When I started middle school (which was actually fifth grade), the anger that built up in me started to get worse. My older brother Tyrone started getting into serious trouble at school. He was skipping class, throwing things across the classroom, and then he hit a teacher on the butt with his agenda book. What in the world was he thinking? Even football wasn't keeping him out of trouble. In fact, it was with some of his fellow football players that he started getting in the worst trouble. Our mom was always stressed out having to deal with Tyrone's mess and my sisters and I would often bear the brunt of her anger with Tyrone. I remember my grandma trying to talk to Tyrone about his behavior and to my mom about taking things out on the rest of us, but her talking didn't seem to make a difference in either situation. I guess things just started building up inside me and I started lashing out at my family, so my mom decided it was time for me to start seeing a therapist. I'd go once a week after school and talk to the doctor about what was going on in my life. He even prescribed some medicine for me to take, and it did make me feel better. I still missed Ms. Byrd and her squishy dice, though.

Working with the therapist, Dr. Whitestone, was actually enjoyable for me. At my first appointment with him, he was trying to make me do this series of tests where he would give me some numbers and I was supposed to give the numbers back to him but in reverse. After I breezed through the first three or four series of numbers, he just stared at me and said, "Man, you're too smart. Why are you getting in trouble? What's going on

that's making you so angry?" I didn't really know what answer to give him. I wished I knew what my problem was, but I just didn't. That in itself was frustrating and made me mad. We talked about a lot of different subjects like school, my stepdad, and my friends. I remember talking about Jason and our math competitions, and I also told the doc about Ms. Byrd's squishy dice. He suggested that I get a similar object to keep with me so that when I started to get angry, I could just squeeze it until I calmed down. My mom found me this squishy ball that looked like the earth and I kept it in my backpack...I think it was still there when I went to high school.

Anger used to always get the best of me. Even though I was in therapy for it, I could never figure out exactly what it was that made me so angry all the time. I don't know if it was from growing up with my stepdad who was always mad at any little thing that I did or what, but it was tough for me to control those emotions. Normally I would get mad over stupid stuff that happened at home or on the bus, like maybe my brother took my favorite bag of chips or some little kid sat in my seat. I was always getting written up on that stupid bus! I don't know what it was that made me act out on the bus. But then in sixth grade, it happened in my math class, and the only person I was angry at was myself.

I was the only Black kid in this gifted math class, even though I wasn't gifted yet, and my (*White*) teacher Mrs. Foy thought I was the best thing since sliced bread. I'm not bragging; she would actually say that to me! She was always telling me how good I was at math and that I was one of the most gifted math students she had ever taught. One day, I think it was right after Halloween, we were working on word problems and needed to use the information to create some equations, or something like that. Some of the other

kids were working on the problems with a partner but I wanted to work by myself. So, I was trying to figure out how to write an equation from this word problem, but nothing I wrote down made any sense. I could tell I was getting frustrated, but I kept working at it, making a hole in my paper from all of the erasing.

Finally, I got so pissed off at myself that I just shoved my papers and pencil off the front of my desk, and it all landed in a mess on the floor. Mrs. Foy came over to me and said, “Emmanuel, please step out in the hall with me.” All of the kids’ eyes turned to me. I stood up, my face so hot I thought my skin might melt, and walked to the door. Mrs. Foy didn’t yell at me or anything; I couldn’t believe that. So, we went out in the hall and she asked me, all quietly and calm-like, why I got so mad. I didn’t want to tell her it was because I couldn’t solve that stupid problem, so I just stayed quiet. She asked me, “Did another student bother you? Is there something else going on?” Finally, I told her that today was the first time I couldn’t figure out the answer to a math problem and she just smiled at me. She didn’t get angry at me or anything, but she just told me that she would help me figure out the problem. I was still mad at myself for not being able to figure out the problem on my own, but it was nice to have a teacher in my corner.

I think that first gifted math class is when I really fell in love with math. I went to class everyday ready to learn something new and to be challenged and knowing that I would learn more about math excited me. The critical thinking that was involved, working on math that was more advanced than just addition and subtraction. When we started using variables to represent unknown numbers, I just couldn’t get enough of those problems. I really did see each problem as a challenge, and I never backed down from a challenge! Before that class, most things related to academics came easy to me . . . I’m

not sure why school wasn't hard for me, but I wasn't complaining. But when I started having to really think about how to solve a problem, I was in my zone. I even liked helping other kids understand the hard problems we were working on when they struggled. Sometimes Mrs. Foy would ask me to help someone else, but sometimes the other students would just seek me out on their own. I think maybe that's when I started kinda thinking that I might want to be a math teacher, but I wasn't sure about it yet.

Later that year, sixth grade, everybody in the grade took these two tests (*the CogAT and the ITBS*) and when the scores came back, Mrs. Foy came to me in homeroom and told me that I made the highest math scores on those tests out of the entire sixth grade. She was so excited that she hugged me in front of everyone. I was real proud of myself, but I guess I wasn't really surprised. I had always been good at math and those tests were so easy. I would have been mad if I hadn't done good on them. But then Mrs. Foy told me that I was going to get a letter to take home about making it into gifted and to make sure I showed it to my mom and stepdad because it required a signature for me to be in the other gifted classes. I didn't really care about any classes other than math, but since Mrs. Foy was my favorite teacher, I showed my mom the letter and she signed it for me to take back to school the next day. Mom and I called my grandparents to tell them and my grandma said, "Well, I already knew that. I've been telling you how smart you is." When I gave the letter back to Mrs. Foy, she told me that since it was only my math scores that were so high, I wasn't going to be put in any other gifted classes, but I would still be known as gifted from then on. That didn't mean a whole lot to me back then, but it would soon become very important to me and to the rest of my school career.

Even though I was doing well in class, getting good grades, controlling my anger, and behaving myself, I still couldn't stay out of trouble on the school bus. It was normally in the afternoon when I was tired that I would just snap on another kid who was doing something to irritate me. Black kids, White kids, Hispanic kids... anyone who made me mad was fair game. I know that sometimes one of those kids would just do things to intentionally piss me off and make me snap, but I couldn't keep myself from smarting off, cussing, or even getting into physical fights. After spring break in sixth grade, Ms. Cloud, the principal, called me and my mom into her office and talked to us about me needing to stay off the school bus in order to stay out of trouble. She suggested that playing football would be a good way for me to get some energy out and would keep me off of the bus in the afternoons. I never really played football before, except just in the yard with my cousins, but my mom and I both knew that I something must change, or I was going to end up in serious trouble. Mom and I met with the seventh-grade football coach to get some information about tryouts and a physical, and a few weeks later, I found out that I would be playing football on the seventh-grade team the next school year.

Just like the year before, the only gifted class I took in seventh grade was math. The only other gifted class offered was English, and I knew I didn't belong in there. I had a new math teacher that year, Ms. Shealey, who was also White. In fact, now that I think about it, my only non-White teachers in middle school were my PE coaches. Anyway, Ms. Shealey, she was like Mrs. Foy because she was always calling on me to give an answer or go to the board and she would tell the class, "See how Emmanuel did it? That's how you need to approach the problem, too." When my math teachers would do that, it

gave me a weird feeling. Like, I was proud that I could solve the problem and everything, and it did make me feel good that the teacher called on me instead of any of the White kids in the room (I was still the only Black kid in there), but sometimes I just didn't want the spotlight on me, you know? Sometimes I'd try to hide my face or act like I was getting something out of my backpack so Ms. Shealey would call on someone else. That worked sometimes and it was nice having another kid go up to the whiteboard and solve a problem. Of course, every once in a while, the kid would get the wrong answer and that would make me smile a little bit on the inside. Not out of meanness, but just because I knew that it was okay for all of us to make mistakes and not be ashamed of it.

Football turned out to be the positive that Ms. Cloud and my mom hoped it would be. I practiced every day after school, so I no longer rode the bus home. That kept me out of trouble because it kept me off the bus, but practice also wore me out and I was too exhausted to try to be bad. One of my teachers that year, Coach Matthews, was also my offensive line coach, so I knew I needed to be on my best behavior all the time. But sometimes Tyrell and Vontres made it hard to stay out of trouble. The classes we were in together, like Coach Matthews' social studies class, Tyrell would goof off and play around because he really didn't care about academics. I actually think he just went to school so he could play on the football team. Vontres, he didn't really say much, but he would follow Tyrell and laugh whenever Tyrell would do stupid stuff. I sat by them and I couldn't help but laugh when Tyrell would start clowning around. Then Vontres and I would start egging Tyrell on, which made things worse, until Coach would give us that look that said we better calm down or we'd be running suicides during the next practice or sitting on the bench at the next game. I mean, we was the three best football players on

the team, so I didn't really think Coach would bench us, but I didn't want to tempt fate, you know?

At the end of seventh grade, I was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society. I worked hard, earned good grades, and stayed out of major trouble, so me and a lot of my friends, including Jason and Austin, were inducted. There were even kids who weren't in gifted classes that was inducted, including several Black kids, boys and girls. Of course, there was still more White kids in Honor Society than there were Black kids, but I was used to that by now. We participated in this really nice ceremony where I wore a tie, and my mom and grandparents came to sit in the bleachers. They were really proud of me, but just like when I made gifted, no one in my family was really surprised. At the end of the ceremony, the two sponsors of the Honor Society talked to us and our parents about the trip to Washington, D.C. that we'd be able to take in eighth grade. I couldn't believe that I had the opportunity to go to the nation's capital. I just hoped my mom was going to let me go and could find the money to send me.

Eighth grade brought a big change when it came to gifted classes. Basically, all the kids who were smart or high achieving were put in advanced and honors classes together. But here is the thing—you needed to apply to be in those classes. Even if you were gifted and had already been in gifted class, it wasn't just automatic that you'd be in those advanced and honors classes. Well, for some reason, I didn't know about that, so my mom didn't know about that, so when I got my class schedule at open house for eighth grade, there was no gifted math class on there. I looked and looked at that gold sheet of paper, but my math class was just listed as math. I figured I did something wrong or made someone mad and that was why I wasn't back in the gifted class, but I didn't say

nothing, not even to my mom. I looked at my homeroom roster taped to the wall and even though I knew some of those kids on the list, none of my gifted friends were on there.

I went through that first week of eighth grade bored out of my mind, especially in math. I thought to myself, “There is no way I’m gonna stay out of trouble this year if my classes are like this.” I had too much time on my hands, and there was too many fellow football players in my classes. Then, at the end of the first week of school, Ms. Shealey, my seventh-grade math teacher, came to my homeroom class with some papers and told me to go out in the hall with her. She asked, “Why didn’t you apply to be in the advanced and honors classes? You should be in my math class again this year!” I didn’t know what she was talking about, so I just shrugged. She made that teacher face at me and said, “Emmanuel, you are one of the top math students I have ever taught, and you WILL be in my class!” We went to the teachers’ lounge and she made me call my mom so she could talk to her. After Ms. Shealey hung up, she handed me the packets of papers and told me that Mom was expecting them when I got home. The next week, I was back in my gifted math class...and also in honors language arts, honors social studies, Spanish II, and high school physical science.

When I got into those higher classes, man, it was amazing. I was back in classes with Jason and Austin and the other White gifted kids I had been in class with before, but there were actually Black kids in those classes, too! No Tyrell or Vontres, of course, but there were some Black kids that actually cared about their grades and about learning. There were also some Hispanic students in my classes, too, so things were finally getting to be a little more diverse, which I thought was cool. I liked that because then I could blend in and not be “THE smart Black kid.” Finally, there were smart Black kids other

than me! I didn't like feeling like I was having to prove that Black kids could be smart anymore; my classmates were proof of that. I still hung out mostly with Jason and Austin, and we ate lunch together almost every day, but seeing other brown faces in class was nice. To this day, I am still so thankful for Ms. Shealey coming to look for me and for calling my mom to get me into the classes she knew I should be in.

Freshman year of high school, I was in all advanced and honors classes. Well, plus weightlifting for football and a PE class. Most of the kids from my eighth-grade classes were in my ninth-grade classes, including Jason and Austin. In class was pretty much the only place I would see those two since they were in band and I was on the football team, so we didn't eat lunch at the same time. Just like in eighth grade, I wasn't the only Black kid in my classes, so I liked that. I remember the first day of school when we walked into English class and all of the White kids went to one side of the room and the Black kids went to the other. After we got into our desks, Ms. Marvis, who was Black, remarked, "Now, why did you guys sit yourselves like that? We aren't going to be segregated in this class. Mix it up or I'll make a seating chart!" A few kids from each side got up and switched seats, including me. I ended up sitting next to Jason, all the time wondering why I didn't sit next to him in the first place.

Outside of football practice and our Friday night games, I didn't really see too much of my football teammates. I mean, we was in weightlifting class together, but they wasn't in any of my academic classes. I think one main reason for this was that some of them just didn't care about school. They would make failing grades or would go to tutoring during study hall...you could just tell sports was all that mattered to them. Another obstacle, I guess you could say, for them would be the way they grew up, their

surroundings. I don't think a lot of the football players, well, the Black ones, at least, had the kind of support system at home like I did. My mom and grandparents pushed me to do my best in school, and I don't think many of those guys experienced the same support. One time, Tyrell asked me, "Man, why your mom always on you about your grades? You just got to do good enough to stay eligible to play and to graduate." It's a shame, though, because I think if some of those guys applied themselves a little more, they could have done better, school-wise. I mean, I knew they wasn't dumb because they could learn all those football plays, but they just didn't make school a priority.

One thing I did notice once I got to high school was that it seemed to almost bother Tyrell and Vontres when I would hang out with my White friends like Jason and Austin. I can still hear Tyrell telling me that I was acting White because I was in classes with the White gifted kids and the smart Black kids that he said acted White, too. The first time he said that to me was after football practice. The marching band was practicing on their practice field and we were practicing plays on the next field over, so when practice was finished, I walked over to the band field to see what Jason was doing that Friday night (we had a bye week, so no football game). After I chatted with Jason for a minute or two, I went to the locker room to change out of my practice gear. That's when Tyrell came over to my locker and said, "When you gonna quit acting White, man?" I kinda just punched him in the shoulder in a playful way and told him to stop messing with me, but then he asked me the same thing again. "What you mean, man?" I asked Tyrell. He told me that I was always wanting to be around the White kids since I was in classes with all of them. When I said that there was Black kids in those classes, too, he said that those Black kids were also acting White. I told Tyrell, "Whatever, man. You

know I don't care about that kind of stuff. My friends are just my friends." He shrugged and walked out of the locker room and I just let his comments roll off my back.

For whatever reason, once I got to high school, I really started being more of a class clown than before. Maybe it had a little to do with not wanting to always just be seen as the smart one in the class. Sometimes I wasn't even trying to be a clown, but it would just happen. I guess it's just my sense of humor and I just like a good time. I like to joke, make people laugh, and play around, and I think that if everybody is having fun in class, it just makes the class better and stuff is easier to learn. Kids have a better experience when there's fun and laughter. Of course, my teachers didn't always agree with that, but I learned which classes I could goof around in and which ones I couldn't. Some teachers, my favorites, just knew that I was going to come in joking and enjoying life and I think that was why they could tell when something was wrong with me. If I didn't come into class smiling and laughing, those teachers would ask me what was wrong or if I was having a bad day. It made me feel like those teachers actually cared about me.

Other teachers, though, they wouldn't know when I had a bad day because all they wanted to do was yell at me or give me detention. Like my Spanish III teacher Mrs. Andrew. Man, she was something else. She wanted everything to be perfect in that class and she just would never lighten up. I'd just walk in laughing and she'd tell me to get to work and stop goofing off. Finally, it was enough and so I just lost it on her. I told her that her class was a pain in my ass and that she was too tight on us kids. All the eyes in the room were on me and it was eerily quiet. Her face turned red and she said, in this weirdly calm voice, "Get out of my class and do not ever come back." I replied, "You

don't have to worry about that. I'm done with this shit." I walked out, went across the hall, and sat in the other Spanish teacher's classroom for the rest of the period. I got moved into his class for the rest of the year and finished Spanish III on independent study in his classroom. Thinking about it now, I know I was in the wrong, but at the time, I just felt like she was always on my ass like my stepdad had been, and I just didn't want to deal with her anymore. I really should go back and apologize to her.

I kept taking those advanced and honors classes with those same gifted kids during my sophomore year. I still took weightlifting, but I thought it would be cool to take the mock trial class that was taught by an actual lawyer. That was a cool class and there was actually a few Black girls in there, too, which made it nice, not being the token Black kid in the room. I did fairly well in my academic classes, making nothing below a B, except for honors chemistry. That class just about killed me! I never really liked science that much to begin with but my chemistry teacher that year was probably the toughest teacher ever. She taught that class like all of us was going to go to Georgia Tech, man! Dr. Wilson, the chemistry teacher, would ask me why I had such a block against science when I was so good at math. I knew those two subjects normally went together, but I just never got into science like I did math. I squeaked by with a low C in that class, and I figured my mom would tell me no summer football practice, but she was cool about it. I couldn't believe it! But she told me, "You are doing well in all of your other classes, and I know you don't like that science stuff. I'm still proud of you." Say what? I don't know if she would have been that chill if she and my stepdad hadn't been going through some things, but I took any break I could get.

My junior year, my schedule got messed up and I ended up in the early childhood education class. That class was for kids that wanted to be elementary teachers and that was not me. I tried and tried to get out of that class, but the rest of my schedule prevented me from really taking anything else during that period. So, I stuck with it and actually ended up enjoying the class. The class was mostly girls, which I didn't mind at all, but there was a few other boys in there, too. I was the only Black boy but a few of my female friends like Neesha and Alana, who were both Black, were there. Some of my White teammates from football were in that class but not any of the Black players like Tyrell or Vontres. On Thursdays, the class would go over to the primary school and read to the kindergarteners and us football players would wear our jerseys. Those little kids loved seeing us in our jerseys! Their little reactions were priceless, and it made me feel good to know that I was making someone else so happy, even if it was a 5-year-old kid. It was almost like we were superheroes to them and that was something special. I'm glad now that I stayed in that class, even if it wasn't by choice.

My mom and stepdad got divorced late during my junior year of high school. I wasn't really happy or sad about it; I really just didn't care, almost like I was just numb. I didn't communicate or hang around with my stepdad anymore anyway, and it would be nice not to get blamed for everything anymore. I guess it was because of the divorce, but me, my sisters, and my mom moved three times during my senior year. My brother ended up in jail that year and my mom started being so much harder on me, almost like my stepdad was. I was still just a kid, but I was expected to be the man of the family, take care of my mom and my autistic sister, and that was a lot to handle, you know? I didn't let that responsibility affect my schoolwork, football life, or social life, though. Family

takes care of family, right? And since my stepdad wasn't there to take care of the family anymore, it was up to me. I stepped up and did what I needed to do.

Towards the end of junior year, I was asked to go see Mrs. Christopher, the AP Calculus teacher who, of course, was White. She was never my teacher, so I wasn't sure what she wanted to see me for, but during lunch one day, I went to her classroom. That room was on the honors' hall, which was where all of my academic classes were. I opened her door and there were maybe 8 kids sitting in the class. Surprise, surprise! They was all White. I knew that was her AP class period because the valedictorian and the salutatorian for that year's graduating class was in there. I got a little nervous because everyone turned to look at me when I opened the door, but the kids smiled at me and Mrs. Christopher told the class she'd be right back. She and I went out into the hall and she asked, "You're Emmanuel, aren't you?" I nodded. She then told me that she heard a lot about how good at math I was and how I actually enjoyed math, which was rare for a high school kid. She said that she wanted me to take her AP Calculus class my senior year, but somehow, I lacked the prerequisites for it. Instead, she wanted me to take college math as a dual enrollment class. I guess she seen how skeptical I was since those dual enrollment classes was known for being super-easy because she said, "That class is moving from the technical school to the university, so it will be more of what you need. I really think you should take advantage of that course so that you can focus on higher-level math when you go to college." I told her I would think about it and talk to my mom that night. The next day at school, I went back to Mrs. Christopher's classroom and told her that I would sign up for the college math course for my senior year.

In addition to my dual enrollment college math class, I also took dual enrollment English I and II and AP Psychology during my senior year. I did well in all of those classes except English II, but that wasn't really my fault. I took that class in the spring semester, which was also my track season. Those track practices were so damn hot and humid, man! One day during practice, I remember it was a Tuesday, I was running the 100-meter dash and I just fell out. I mean, I was running 1 minute and then the next minute, I was sprawled out on the track. I was out cold. I ended up in the hospital so the doctors could run a bunch of tests to see what was going on with me. I was in the hospital for 4 days and then I stayed home from school for another week once they released me because I was just so weak and felt like I was just drained of energy. Obviously, I missed my dual enrollment class during that time, too, and I when I was finally able to go back to school, I went to the (*White*) instructor and asked for what I missed. The doctor gave me a release form from the hospital and everything, so I showed the teacher all of that paperwork just so he'd know I wasn't making it up. He looked at those papers and then told me that I would need to complete all of the assignments I missed while I was out plus some additional work to make up for missing class. It wasn't work that everyone else finished; it was basically punishment for missing his class meetings. I told him that wasn't fair and that if the rest of the class wasn't required to do those assignments, then I shouldn't have to, either. Again, I showed him the forms from the hospital, but he just stared at me, holding out this huge packet of work he wanted me to do. Was the work going to be too challenging for me to complete? No, of course not. But I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of making me complete that worthless mess. I attended the rest

of the classes (there was only like two or three left) but I never did that work. Needless to say, I didn't get credit for that semester of college English.

In March of my senior year, I was awarded an academic scholarship to this small, predominantly White private college in New England. *[At the time Emmanuel was awarded this scholarship, the college was 62% White, 11.5% Black, 8.5% Hispanic, 4% 2 or more races, and 14% other races.]* I was going to play football there, but the coach knew that I was serious about my academics, and that football would always come second. On signing day, there was four of us football players that got signed to colleges, all of us Black, but I was the only one signed for academics. My whole family came that day—my mom, my grandparents, my aunties, and even my dad showed up. And, get this, my eighth-grade English teacher came! Everyone was so proud of me, and I was proud of myself. I tried not to make a big deal out of it, but deep down, I was real excited. Well, I was excited until I realized that even with the scholarship, I still wouldn't be able to afford to go to school there. By then, I thought, it was really too late to apply to any other schools, so I just didn't. I was so disappointed, and I knew I was letting other people down, too.

I ended up working lots of different jobs after I graduated: fast food, retail, fire restoration, and sanitation. Meaningless jobs that were just a way to make money. In all those jobs, there was just something that would happen that would let me know it was time to leave that place and move on to another. I either didn't get along with the boss, or my schedule would keep me away from my son too much. Yeah, that sounds like a bunch of excuses, I know, and I really don't mind doing jobs like taking out trash or vacuuming up nasty water. Of course, I didn't think this is what I'd be doing at 23, but here I am. I'm

not going to stay here, though. My goal is to go to the technical college and get the rest of my basic credits out of the way and then go to school to teach middle school math. My girlfriend just got done with cosmetology school and got a good job so now it's my turn. One of my former teachers is going to help me get the paperwork filled out to apply to the tech school, so that will be my first step.

I love being a community coach for my team of 10-year-old kids; most of them are Black. I try not to be too hard on my players. Some kids now are just fragile, man; some of them you can yell at, and some of them you can't. Some kids will just break down. They will cry. I try to keep practice fun and interesting and I always remind myself that these are just kids. We (*the coaches*) try to teach all the kids about life, not just football. I always knew that sports wasn't enough for me. I told myself one day, if I would have took just that football scholarship I was offered, I could get hurt and they could take my scholarship away, just like that. I'd have nothing left; I'd probably drop out of college. But if your priority is academics and you can get a scholarship for academics, you can still play sports but know there's a security net to fall back on. Not everyone thinks like that, though, especially some players' parents I've dealt with, but I always tell my players, "You are a student athlete, and the word student comes first." That's what my favorite high school basketball coach preached to me, so now I preach it to my players. Hopefully it will get through to some of those kids that I coach. I don't know what they're learning from their parents, but I try to talk to the kids as much as I can.

If I was never identified as gifted and if I never took those higher-level classes, I would have just ended up being in the easy classes with a bunch of other football players

and getting into trouble because I was bored with the work. I would have been in class with mostly Black kids, I think, and I probably would have been in way more trouble than normal. Granted, I'm sure I could've kept my good grades for a lot less work on my part, but it wouldn't have been worth it if I was in the principal's office all the time or if I got kicked off the football or track teams. Plus, my mom and my granddad would have probably whooped me something good and I definitely didn't want that. Without a doubt, if it wasn't for my gifted classes, teachers, and peers, I would have just been another statistic. Another Black guy in jail, probably a dropout and thinking that the only thing that mattered was sports. I don't even want to think about what life would have been like if gifted wasn't a part of my life.

About 2 months ago, my best friend, my brother, Jason died. It was such a shock and I still can't even believe it, man. I mean, I saw him just the week before, and we texted each other that day. That same day that he died. We sent each other some pictures on Snapchat, stupid stuff like a picture of a pizza and one of some new Nikes, and then that night, he was gone. We was always checking up on each other, even when he was away for (*military*) training or I was busy with work or my kid. It's hard for me to even fathom that we won't be sending each other Snaps or texts anymore. If he had just stayed off that stupid motorcycle he'd still be here, but he loved that thing, thought he was a badass whenever he was on it. God, I miss him. Even though me and Austin are still tight, I don't think I'll ever have another friend like Jason. I just hope my son finds a friend as true and loyal as Jason was to me.

My son, Amir, he is my motivation for everything I do. I want to do anything it takes to make sure he is taken care of. It could be the worst day in the world, but when I

get home and see Amir smile at me and reach out to hug me, that makes all of the shitty parts of the world okay. I love going to visit him at school and see him playing with his classmates. Whether they Black or White, it doesn't matter. I don't know if his seizures will stop or whether he'll ever get to be in gifted classes, but I sure hope he gets that chance. Even if he is never officially gifted, I will make sure he is challenged and is around other kids who value education and want to succeed. I don't think I'll ever tell him not to be friends with someone, unless that person is a bad influence, and I hope that he makes friends of all races that appreciate him for who he is.

Reflection

Two months after our last interview session, Emmanuel emailed to inform me that the Liberty Valley School System hired him as an elementary paraprofessional and an assistant coach for the ninth-grade football team. His excitement was evident as he concluded with, "This is just the first step to me becoming a middle school math teacher!" He described how proud his family was of him for taking this leap of faith, making his dream of becoming a teacher and coach closer to a reality. He even shared with me a thank-you card from his supervising classroom teacher, which stated how proud of him she was, from his ability to lead small-group math instruction to the way his positive energy brightened up their classroom. According to Emmanuel, he would have never been in the position to be granted this life-changing opportunity if it had not been for the gifted program.

Felicia

“I guess girls who did things that got them suspended from school didn’t belong in smart-kid classes.”

Meet Felicia

Felicia, 21, just graduated with a degree in secondary mathematics education from a public state university. During her senior year, she completed her student teaching in a 7th grade math classroom at a predominantly Black school in an urban school system. After graduation, Felicia decided to stay in her current urban area and hoped to begin her teaching career in the same middle school where she completed her student teaching. She has no intention of returning to the rural South Georgia town where she spent her middle and high school years, at least for the foreseeable future.

Due to Felicia’s class schedule, student teaching schedule, and two work schedules, it was difficult to find times for her three interviews. Two of her interviews took place virtually while she was in her car, driving from her internship to one of her jobs. All three interviews were conducted via Zoom, and the final interview did not occur until after Felicia’s final semester of college was complete. As of the final interview, Felicia had accepted her first teaching job as a 7th grade math teacher at a predominantly Latinx school in the same urban area where she completed her student teaching assignment. She is excited to begin her career and eager to inspire students to achieve their dreams.

Felicia’s Story

As stereotypical as it seems, you know, Black kid with only one parent, I grew up in a single-parent household for most of life. It was just me and my mom for a long time.

My dad was never really in the picture. He moved to California when I was six to “figure some stuff out,” according to my mom. She said that he suffered from mental health issues and he went west to try to do some healing. Mom didn’t think it really worked, though. She said that there were demons he couldn’t get rid of. Apparently, those demons were why, as a married couple, my parents never worked out. In December of my junior year (*in college*), my dad passed away. It was kind of hard going back to school after his funeral, but strangely, I wasn’t as sad as I thought I would be. I mean, I appreciate the few things he did do for me, but I guess I’m just hopeful that he is finally at peace.

My mom is just my everything. Of course, she’s my mom first, but she’s also my best friend. I can call her, talk to her about anything, and she can do the same with me. We have had such a strong relationship since I was really young, and I’ve recently realized that most people, especially females, don’t have the type of relationship with their moms that I do with mine. And it’s not just our relationship. My mom has also been my biggest inspiration. She was the first person in the family to go to college, so I guess that’s why school has always been a big deal to me. Not only did she get her Bachelor’s in psychology, but then she also got her Master’s in counseling and rehabilitation. She currently works as a counselor with the Department of Juvenile Justice and does behavioral therapy at a local mental health facility, too. I am so proud of everything that she accomplished, and I am thankful for the love of learning that she instilled in me.

I have always wanted my mom to be proud of me, so even from a very young age, I never wanted to do anything to disappoint her or make her upset with me. When I was three, I got in trouble for coloring on the living room floor. Lying on my tummy with my princess coloring book and apparently non-washable crayons, I was happily creating a

masterpiece when I decided to see what the colors would look like on our white tile floor. That happened to be when my mom walked in the living room to check on me and saw the bright colors on her spotless floor. She squatted down to my level and said, “Felicia, I am very disappointed in you. You should not have colored on the floor like that.” Well, I burst into tears as soon as I heard the word disappointed. When I got older and my mom told me this story, she ended with, “From that day on, I realized I really didn’t need to get on to you for anything. You had such high expectations for yourself that knowing someone was disappointed in you was enough punishment.” My mom has been that way my whole life.

While I am my mom’s only child, I do have a few siblings. My half-brother, my dad’s son, is eight and he still lives in California with his mom. We’ve only met in person twice: once when I visited my dad in California, and then when I returned to California for my dad’s funeral. My brother is very introverted and was so sad about our dad’s passing that I told him I would keep in contact with him when I went back home. We videocall every now and then just to keep in touch, but he is just so far away and there is so much going on in my life and I don’t get to talk to him as much as I should. I also have two stepsisters from my mom’s second marriage. One sister is 2 years older than me and the other is 3 years younger than me. We’ve known each other for 9 years and while we were close during high school, we aren’t really close anymore. Each of us is kind of doing her own thing and we normally only see each other during holidays and family get-togethers.

I don’t really have a huge extended family, but there are a few relatives I’ve always been close with. My aunt Maddie, my mom’s sister, she and I always had a tight

relationship. When I was growing up, Maddie and my mom shared a plot of land, and Maddie's house was literally not even 10 feet away from our house. Plus, my mom and Maddie have always been very close, doing everything together. So, I have a strong relationship with Maddie and her kids, my cousins Breanna and Calvin, because I grew up right there next door to them and we were always over at each other's houses. As far as grandparents, I'm really only close with my mom's dad and my dad's mom. Strange, I know, but that's just how it is. They are the only two grandparents that have been there since day one and they are the two who look out for me still. I try to talk to each of them at least once a week, but sometimes it's hard to squeeze that time in.

Growing up, I was definitely considered myself a smart child because I was always into reading and learning new information. All of that reading and learning turned me into a curious kid, so I did find myself in trouble a little bit. Not intentionally, just out of curiosity of certain things, but that curiosity sometimes led to undesirable consequences! When I was around five or six, my mom and I went to my uncle's house for a family lunch. Well, you know how kids like to play in the dirt when they're younger? So, there was this root in the ground, and I convinced my cousin to help me pull it up. I wanted to see how big the part underground was and which tree the root belonged to. We pulled and pulled on that root, and we were actually able to get part of it out of the ground! We were excited until we saw water suddenly flooding the ground around the root. I'm guessing it was close to a water pipe and we broke the pipe when we pulled on the root. I was like, "Oh, my gosh! What did I just do? What did I do?" I begged my cousin, "Don't tell on me. Let's just go home and say we found it like that." But my cousin and her big mouth couldn't keep a secret, and she ran and told my uncle

what happened. Once I confessed to my uncle and my mom, she gave me a whipping right there in front of everyone, and then gave me the silent treatment all the way home. Most of the time, my mom appreciated my curiosity, but I guess destroying someone else's property was a bit too much for her to let slide.

My first memory of school is from around the same age as the root episode. It was first grade, and my mom and I moved to the Atlanta area from our rural hometown. I didn't know anybody and felt a little out of place, but my teacher immediately put me at ease. Her name was Ms. Harrison, and she was my first Black teacher. She was so nice, but more importantly, she always encouraged her students to do their best, and I really think she believed that my classmates and me could do anything we set our minds to! Right before Christmas that year, we participated in a spelling bee. All of the first graders, most of whom were Black, went to the cafeteria and got on the stage. I was nervous; not because I couldn't spell hard words, but because I lost not one but both of my two front teeth! One by one, little kids stepped up to the microphone and were given a word to spell out loud. And one by one, those kids misspelled the words and went to sit in the audience. I kept getting words correct, so I kept standing on the stage while the group around me got smaller and smaller. Finally, it came down to me and this other girl and I went to the microphone. I can't remember what word the teacher gave me, but I got it right. Then the other girl went to the microphone, but she got her word wrong. I thought I won, but then the teacher said I needed to spell one more word correctly. She called out the word and I spelled it right! I won the spelling bee, even though I was missing my two front teeth! I was so proud of myself! I even got one of those little blue ribbons that my mom put on our fridge. I bet Mom still has that ribbon in a box somewhere!

I absolutely loved school! There's always been a hunger in me for learning new things (there's that curiosity again) and I just want to soak up as much knowledge as I can. I've been a voracious reader since I was young and loved learning even before I officially started school. A big part of my love for education came from my attending my mom's college classes with her. My mom was the first person in our family to not only go to college and graduate, but also to then move on to getting an advanced degree. She often couldn't find a babysitter for me when she was working on her Master's, so she would just take me with her to her night classes. I would sit in the back of the room and try to follow the conversation and lecture that was happening. When we'd get home, I'd get her notes and textbooks and try to read through them, not really able to make sense out of much of the information, but still trying, nonetheless. I thought that by doing that, by trying to be a student like my mom, that I was continuing the new family tradition of prioritizing education and pursuing a college degree.

Second grade was when I was officially tested for gifted. I don't really remember what the test was like, but I do remember me and maybe five or six other Black students were pulled out of class and taken to the library with a teacher I never saw before. The other kids were the ones in my class who always raised their hands to answer a question or go to the board to solve a problem. Well, I was one of those kids, too. I guess maybe we were the smartest students in the class. On the day of the gifted test, each of us kids sat at our own table and we were given a thick booklet to complete while the teacher read instructions to us. A few days after the trip to the library, my teacher gave me an envelope to take home to my mom. She told me that it was a good note, I guess to make sure I gave it to my mom instead of hiding it in my backpack. My mom was so proud

when she opened that envelope and read that letter. She immediately called my auntie and said, “We knew all along that Felicia is a smart cookie! This proves we were right!” I was standing there in the kitchen, listening to the conversation and smiling so big! My mom and my auntie always told me how intelligent I was, and now they had actual proof.

There weren’t separate classes for gifted students in my elementary school. Those of us that were gifted (there were three or four of us, all Black) basically just sat together and worked together but we still did the same assignments and listened to the same instruction as the rest of the class. I didn’t really feel like being gifted was any different from not being gifted, until the second-grade gifted kids got to go on a field trip to a science museum that the other students didn’t get to attend. I actually thought that was kinda unfair to those non-gifted kids because the museum was really cool! While we were there, we got to meet with a real scientist and do a couple of experiments, one of which was the classic Mentos in soda experiment. Looking back on it now, I realize how amazing it was that all of the students that visited the museum that day were Black. But back then, I didn’t think anything of it because almost everyone in my class was Black, too.

Once I got to third grade, I no longer felt like I was the kid of a single parent, thanks to my teacher. Her name was Ms. Sargent, and she was like my school mom, another parent I could depend on, since I couldn’t depend on my dad. Ms. Sargent was so nurturing and caring. Sometimes, I would even go over to her house on the weekends. She would make ice cream sundaes and we would put a jigsaw puzzle together or play board games. In the classroom, she always made me feel like I was important and that I was capable of doing great things. The first B I ever made was in her class. I made an 88

on a reading test and just came unglued. I thought that earning that B was the worst thing in the world and that chaos would erupt everywhere. I was so disappointed in myself! I went to Ms. Sargent, crying, and told her that my mom was going to freak out when she saw that grade. She put her arm around me and told me that it was just a grade and that my mom would be proud of an 88. Later that year when my dog died, she was there for me then, too. She even gave me a little sympathy card that I still keep in my memory box. I would have done anything for Ms. Sargent because I knew she would do anything for me. Oh, and she was right about my mom. When I showed the test to my mom, she hugged me and said, “It’s okay. That’s still a good grade. You tried your best and that’s all I can ask for.” Ms. Sargent really did know everything.

Something else Ms. Sargent did for me and the other gifted students in her class— she made the learning and the work different for us. When we had small-group centers, she would pull the five of us gifted kids, all Black girls, together and we’d get to read a different book or work on tougher math problems than the rest of the class. Of course, now I know that she was differentiating for us and our needs as gifted learners, but back then, it just made me feel special. I never felt like she gave us more work to do just because we were gifted, which was not the case once I got to middle school, but the work was just different. We (*gifted students*) also got a chance to be really creative in our small group. When the class was studying ancient Greece, we did a webquest on ancient Greek architecture and then, as a group, got to rummage through a bunch of supplies to find materials to build our own Grecian columns. I was the designer of the group and the other members built and painted the columns. Then, I wrote a paragraph explaining why our columns looked like they did and why we used the materials that we used, and together

we presented our columns and paragraph to the rest of the class. Back then, I felt pretty special, but now I wonder what the other (*non-gifted*) students were feeling. Did they feel left out? Not as smart as us? If so, then I feel really guilty. I wonder if “gifted guilt” is a thing.

I was in fourth grade when I started falling in love with math. I was good at solving problems, and during math lessons, I could just look at the problem on the board and automatically get it before the teacher even started teaching. I would start talking about the problem and solving it while Ms. Miles, my (*Black*) teacher, was trying to teach, so she was constantly saying, “Shh, Felicia! Let me finish talking before you start solving the problem.” But once the teacher finished the lesson and asked for volunteers to solve the problems she wrote on the board, I was usually the only one, or at least the first one, who raised her hand. I just seemed to enjoy math more than my classmates did and I was certainly better at math than most of them. Wow, that sounds really egotistical...but it’s true! Because I was really good at math, Ms. Miles would sometimes ask me to go around and help other students when they just didn’t understand the material. I never minded doing that; I guess that was my first inkling that I might one day decide to be teacher. I’d try to re-explain things to my classmates in a way that they could understand, almost like using kid-talk. I tried to slow it down more than the teacher did and most of the time, the other kids would eventually catch on. Whenever I helped another student understand what the teacher was trying to teach, that was always a good feeling.

At the end of the first 9 weeks, Ms. Miles wrote, “Felicia has such a big personality!” on my report card. When I saw what she wrote, I got nervous and asked Ms. Miles if that was a bad thing. If it was, I certainly didn’t want to show it to my mom! In a

quiet, calm voice, Ms. Miles told me, “Not at all! It means that you have a lot of positive energy and you want to share it with everyone around you!” Talking to Ms. Miles made me a little less nervous about showing my mom my report card, but I just hoped that my mom took it the same way Ms. Miles meant it. I shouldn’t have doubted Ms. Miles; when my mom read the comment, she just laughed and said, “Ms. Miles isn’t telling me anything I didn’t know!”

Because of my big personality, my mom suggested I try out for the cheerleading program at the local parks and recreation center. I decided to give it a go and my mom signed me up. Tryouts were on a Saturday morning in October, so Mom and I got in the car and drove the few blocks to the rec center. When I entered the room, I saw it was packed with girls about the same age as me. Most of the girls were Black and I recognized a lot of them from school. A couple of girls who were in my class came over to me and we started talking about how nervous we were. We shouldn’t have been, though, because every single girl that showed up that day made a cheer squad.

Fourth grade wasn’t all rainbows and butterflies, though. That year was also when someone first accused me of acting White. Jamari, a Black boy in my class, and I were working together on a social studies project and I was reading a paragraph from our *Weekly Reader* out loud. I think we were paired up because I was a stronger reader than he was. When I finished reading, Jamari looked at me and said, “You sure do act White.” At first, I thought, “How can I act White? What’s so different between the other Black kids and me?” I didn’t really know how to respond, so I just let it slide and kept working on the project. He didn’t say anything else about it, but I had this funny feeling in my stomach that maybe he thought I wasn’t as good as him or as Black as he thought I was

supposed to be. I never heard any of the other gifted students say that they were told they were acting White, so I guessed it was just me. I'd never really been around a lot of White people, so I wasn't really sure if Jamari's comment was supposed to be a compliment or an insult. I simply tried to forget about it, and I never mentioned it to my mom or to my teacher.

Then, in fifth grade, it happened again. And again. Once I started thinking about it, I guessed it was mainly the way that I speak that caused some of my Black peers to say that about me. Not to be stereotypical, but some Black people, they do have this way of talking that uses a lot of slang and isn't always grammatically correct. Using that "Black language," I guess you could call it, makes some Black people who are really smart sound like they aren't educated at all. I have always enunciated my words and been very careful about using correct English, especially at school and around other people, but I think was unintentional, at least, I don't think I intentionally spoke that way. That was just the way I talked! It was always a Black person that would say this to me; I don't remember anyone White ever saying it, at least not to my face. What hurt the worst was when it was a family member who said this to me. Even though I never talked to my mom about it, she definitely overheard a cousin or an uncle talking about how White I was acting. I started just brushing it off, especially once I got to middle school and was in classes with more White students than Black.

I have always been a huge extrovert, a big people-person. I love just walking up to people, even people I don't know, and sparking a conversation. I want to know everything about the people I meet so that I can make connections to them, even if I never see them again. Even when I was younger, I enjoyed meeting new people and

experiencing new things. My grandma, my dad's mom, used to take me on trips with her all the time, and I loved all of the adventures we went on. Most of the time, our travels only took us to Miami to visit family, but Grandma always made those trips so much fun! We would eat delicious food that I couldn't get back at home, and we would go shopping for everything from books to clothes to shoes. Sometimes, we'd go all the way to Key West to meet up with family from the Bahamas.

The beaches in Key West were the absolute best beaches! The beaches were so beautiful, I could lie on the sand and stay in the water all day long! Of course, I'd talk to everyone I'd meet, and I even met a pen pal while playing in the sand one afternoon during the summer after fifth grade. He was this skinny White boy named Jimmy that was sitting on a beach towel close to me and Grandma. He looked really bored so I said, "Well, hello! How are you?" I just kept talking to him, asking him questions about where he was from (he was from South Carolina) and why he was in Key West (he was on a family vacation). Jimmy was going into sixth grade, too, and was also an only child, like me. Because neither of us owned cell phones, we exchanged addresses that we wrote on some napkins my grandma kept in her bag. Jimmy and I wrote to each other a few times at the beginning of sixth grade, mainly complaining about having to go back to school and wishing we were back at the beach, but in December, my life went through a lot of upheaval and writing letters to Jimmy became an afterthought. Recently, I've tried to find him on social media, but no such luck. I do wish we had kept in touch, and I often wonder what he's doing now.

At the beginning of my sixth-grade year, my mom got engaged, which meant I'd be adding a stepdad and two stepsisters into my life. I really wasn't ready to start sharing

my mom with anyone else, but I rolled with it and accepted that my life was going to change. If getting remarried meant that my mom was going to be happy, then I could deal with it. My soon-to-be stepdad looked for a job in the Atlanta area, but that just didn't work out. He thought he could get a better job back in South Georgia where my mom and I were originally from. My mom knew that it would be easy for her to get another job as a counselor no matter where we lived, so it was decided that we would move. All five of us would pack up and move back "home," as my mom would say, during the first week of Christmas break. And that's what happened. I couldn't believe that I would be changing middle schools in the middle of the year. I had two best friends who were in all of my classes and I did not want to leave them behind. They would go on through middle and high school together without me, and I would move away to someplace where I had no friends at all. To say that I was disappointed is a huge understatement.

When we arrived back in South Georgia and got settled into our new house, my mom took the three of us girls and enrolled us in school. Mom made sure that the lady taking all of our information knew that I was gifted and that I needed to be put in as many gifted classes as possible. By that time, I really was more of a shining star in math than in English, science, or social studies, but my mom wanted me to be challenged in all content areas. The registrar said, "Well, in sixth grade, the only truly gifted classes we offer are science and social studies. We can certainly put Felicia in what's considered advanced math and English, but those classes won't be called gifted." I didn't understand that back then, and I still don't understand it now. I didn't think I was gifted in science or social studies, but now those were the only two gifted options? Having no choice, my mom agreed, and the next day, I nervously started at my new school.

Sitting in my homeroom class the next morning, wearing the cutest outfit from my closet, it was obvious that I was now in the minority, race-wise. Whereas my elementary and first-semester middle schools had been primarily Black, this school was not. I think there were four or five other Black students in my homeroom class, not counting me. That didn't really bother me off the bat because it was just homeroom and we'd only be in that class for about 15 minutes each day. I was sure that there would be more Black students, and maybe even a Black teacher, in my actual classes. Boy, was I wrong. My first class was gifted science. My teacher was White, and I was the only Black kid in the class. Next was advanced math—again, the teacher and all of the students (except me, of course) were White. The same scene played out in gifted social studies and in advanced English. The only time other Black students were in my classes that semester was during electives. My only Black teacher was my PE coach. It was certainly different from the schools I was used to in urban Atlanta!

Probably the toughest class that year (well, that half-year) was gifted social studies. Mr. Quinn, the teacher, was hardcore about social studies and I wasn't used to his way of teaching. He didn't want us to just know and recall basic bits of information—he wanted us to analyze and apply information in ways that were foreign to me. I was lucky that my table partner Lauren, who of course was White, was so nice and willing to help me get acclimated to that class and to that teacher. Before the first test I took in Mr. Quinn's class, Lauren told me, "Now, you can memorize the facts about Australia that we learned, but that's not what he's going to ask you on the test. You'll need to use the facts to answer written response questions and we'll probably have some kind of primary document on there to analyze, too." What? English, please! I had never taken a test like

that before! Lauren let me look at some of the other tests that Mr. Quinn gave before I joined the class, and if it wasn't for that, I don't think I would have passed that Australia test. I made a B and was thankful for that! Of course, I wanted to do better on the next test, and because I learned how to study, I did do better on the next test, but there was definitely a learning curve to overcome!

Seventh grade was my favorite year of middle school. That year, our advanced and honors classes were opened up to more students, and surprise, surprise! There were more smart Black kids other than just me! I mean, a lot more! Where had they all been hiding? In all of my academic classes, which were honors-level classes, there were at least five or six other Black students and I couldn't have been happier! I already knew a few of them from classes like PE and technology, but there were some faces that were brand-new to me. Not only were there Black kids in my classes that year, but there were a few Latinx and Asian students, too. My classes had not been that diverse since I left the Atlanta area, and I loved it! Lauren and I became even closer friends that year, and I made so many new friends, too, friends of different races and ability levels, and I was so much happier than the year before. My mom and stepdad even told me that I smiled more that year than I had in a long time. Our "nerd family," as the students and the teachers called ourselves, really bonded that year, and I finally felt like I was in the right place.

That year, seventh grade, I had this crazy teacher, Dr. Michaels. She was my (*White*) honors English teacher and at the beginning of the year, I did not like her at all. I don't really know what it was about her, but I just did not click with her at all. I think part of it was that she kept trying to get close to me, to get me to talk to her and let her in. I wasn't having any of that. Dr. Michaels was pretty persistent, though, and later on in the

school year, something changed. I finally got it that she really did want the best for me, and I decided that maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to let a teacher really get to know me. She became one of my favorite teachers from all of my school years, and she continued to look after me even after I moved on from seventh grade and eventually, from the middle school. I would visit Dr. Michaels after school throughout my high school career, just to let her know how things were going and to get a little encouragement from her, too. She and I still keep in touch through Facebook to this day.

All good things must come to an end, right? Well, the last week of seventh grade, I made one of the biggest, dumbest mistakes of my life. My mom and stepdad were going through a rough patch and things were so tense at home. My schoolwork was suffering because I just couldn't focus on anything but how my mom was feeling. I almost felt out of control, like I just couldn't keep myself from doing things I knew I shouldn't be doing. Thursday of the last week of school, I let a couple boys talk me into skipping art class and we went into the empty computer lab at the back of the school. Well, I guess they didn't really talk me into it. I knew what I was probably getting myself into, if I'm being totally honest, but I went along with them anyway. Without going into detail, I basically ended up in the principal's office and learned that I would be suspended for the last day of seventh grade and the first full week of eighth grade. The worst punishment, other than my mom's major disappointment in me, was getting removed from the advanced and honors classes and having to finish my middle school career in regular classes with regular kids. My mom actually pleaded with the principal to let me stay in the higher-level classes, but the principal's mind was made up. I guess girls who did things that got them suspended from school didn't belong in smart-kid classes.

The summer after seventh grade was absolutely miserable. I was grounded for the entire summer, so I was stuck in my house all day, every day. My mom took my phone away, and my stepdad removed the TV and PlayStation from my room. I was basically allowed to eat and read but nothing else. I couldn't really blame my parents; I made a major mistake and I knew it was going to take a long time to regain their trust. I didn't get to hang out with any of my friends that summer, and I just knew that they were having sleepovers and going on beach trips without me. Could those newly-made friendships I made in seventh grade survive a whole summer without any contact? That question worried me all summer long. Knowing that I wouldn't be in classes with Sarah, Quan, Lauren, and the others in eighth grade just added to my misery. The new school year couldn't come soon enough, but I also spent a lot of time wishing the new school year would never come.

August finally rolled around and with it came eighth grade. While I was ready to break out of the imprisonment of my house, there was a part of me that dreaded facing all of the students and teachers who had no doubt heard about what I did. As part of my suspension, I missed the first week of school, that easy week where you catch up with your friends and sort of ease back into academics. My mom emailed my new teachers and asked for assignments so that I wouldn't get too far behind. She printed out the work, brought it to me, and, sitting at the kitchen table, I finished it in one night. All of the assignments from math, English, science, and social studies, done before Thursday morning. I couldn't believe how easy the work was. I mean, I know it was just the first week of school, but still . . . I could have done those assignments with my eyes closed. I thought to myself, "Surely the work is going to get more challenging and fun!" That's

what I had grown used to in prior years, so that's what I was expecting. Once again, I couldn't have been more wrong.

The first thing I noticed when I walked into homeroom the following Monday was how many Black kids were in there. Not only that, but my homeroom teacher was Black. As I traveled from class to class that day, I kept noticing the same thing—half of the students in my classes and three of my four teachers were Black. I hadn't been in classes like that since I left Atlanta. As excited as I was to see more dark faces in my classes, I soon realized that the reason there were so many dark faces in those classes was because the instruction was lousy, and the work was a joke. Okay, maybe the instruction wasn't completely lousy, but it seemed like the teachers were so lazy, sitting at their desks and assigning us videos to watch on the Chromebooks. There were no hands-on labs in science, no cool projects in social studies, no engaging novels in language arts. And math...if I didn't already love math like I did, I probably would have just tuned out that year and just squeaked by. Students weren't required to do any critical thinking...every question we answered or problem we solved had one single right answer. Then there was the discipline, or lack thereof. When the teachers actually did teach, I couldn't hear what they were saying over the rest of the class talking and laughing. Kids were constantly getting thrown out of class for misbehavior, which never really seemed like a punishment to me. I absolutely hated my classes that year and was so jealous of my friends who were still in the smart classes and whom I only saw in passing in the lunchroom or in the restroom.

Over the next few months, I slowly just grew used to the way these crazy classes worked. I pretty much made As on all of my work in all of my classes and put forth very

little effort. I never needed to study, there was never much homework, and most of the time, I could just Google the answers to questions on the numerous worksheets we were given. The only part of eighth grade that I really enjoyed was this competition between another student and me. There was this Latinx kid named Juan Carlos in my math class that I would compete with on every test, just to see which of us could make the higher grade. It all started when the math teacher, Ms. Coleman, put Juan Carlos (JC) and me together to work on a set of transformation questions. Working through those problems, I could tell how smart JC was. He answered a couple questions even faster than I could! We started talking once we finished the question set (of course, we finished before everyone else) and I asked, “Have you always been this good at math?” He smiled shyly at me and replied, “I guess. It’s always been pretty easy to me, especially when I didn’t know any English.” I asked JC why he wasn’t in the honors math class down the hall, and he said that he didn’t know anything about it. I explained to him what my previous honors math classes had been like, about how awesome the teachers were and how much I learned in those classes. The more I talked about my old school life, the more I missed it, and I vowed that I’d get back into those honors classes once I got to high school. By the way, I never saw JC after eighth grade. Someone said his family moved back to Guatemala, but I’m not sure. I wish I could thank JC for giving me a reason to keep on pushing through that horrible eighth-grade year.

The first half of high school was pretty much the same as middle school for me. I just stuck to the books and didn’t really try to get involved in anything else like extracurricular activities. I just wanted to be a great academic achiever. More importantly, I wanted my mom to continue to think of me as a high achiever. She was

such an inspiration to me, I wanted to follow in her footsteps and do the best I could academically. Freshman year, my classes, which were advanced and honors, were pretty easy and I just focused on getting my work done. Math was, of course, my favorite, but I enjoyed most of my classes and teachers. I made straight As and stayed out of trouble, so I considered the year a success. My first year of high school flew by and I was excited about what my sophomore year would bring.

Because I did so well in my freshman English and world history classes, I was recommended for AP US History (APUSH) as a sophomore. Boy, was that a mistake! The APUSH teacher (*White male*) and I just did not gel with each other, so it was hard for me to pay attention in class. There was just something about him—he was sarcastic to the point of being rude, and he often played favorites with the students. I wasn't the only Black student in the class, but the teacher seemed to give the White students more leeway when it came to turning in assignments late and things like that. Then, when May rolled around and we took the AP exam, the questions on the test did not match up to what we covered in class. After I read the first few questions, I felt totally unprepared for the exam and had a bit of an anxiety attack. Needless to say, I did not pass the exam, so I did not get the college credit for the class. An entire year, wasted. I decided then that I did not want to take another AP class for the rest of my high school career.

The summer after my sophomore year, I decided to take a dual enrollment psychology class at the local technical school. I'll be honest—I was looking for an easy A and an easy college credit. After APUSH left such a bad taste in my mouth, I just wanted a no-brainer class that wouldn't require a lot of effort, and that's what I'd always heard about those tech school dual enrollment classes. There was an AP Psychology class

offered at my high school, but I just couldn't bring myself to even think about another AP class yet. I breezed through the tech school class, working ahead and finishing weeks ahead of schedule. Of course, I made an A in that class and earned my college credit, which was exciting. I'll admit, maybe the easiness of the class made that A less satisfying than getting an A in one of my honors classes, but that was a small price to pay for a non-anxiety-inducing class!

Somehow, somehow, I ended up with AP literature my junior year. I couldn't believe it when I saw those two ominous letters on my schedule the first day of school! I know I hadn't signed up for an AP class; I chose honors American literature for my English class that year. During lunch on that first day, I marched straight to the counselors' office to see what in the world had happened and to get my schedule changed ASAP. Little did I know that most of the student body also chose that lunch period to try to get schedule changes, too. The line to see a counselor was out the door and down the hall! I decided I would just wait until after my last class of the day to try again. I went to the cafeteria, got a slice of pizza, and scarfed it down before reporting to that dreaded AP class.

I made my way down the English hall and found room 415. It's crazy how I still remember that room number, but I always associated it with my stepdad's birthday. The teacher, Mrs. Munroe, who was White, was standing at the door, greeting the students as we wandered in. I waited in the hall until I was the last one and said to Mrs. Munroe, "I think there's been a mistake. I'm not supposed to be in AP this year." She asked me my name, and when I gave it to her, she checked her roster. Scanning the list with her pencil, she said, "Yep, there you are! You're in the right place. Go ahead and find a seat." I

wanted to protest, but she was already entering the classroom and closing the door behind her. I looked around the room; there were only seven other kids in the room, and I knew all of them. We were all gifted students, we were all girls, and we had been in classes together for years. Of course, I was the only Black student in the room, but since I knew everyone else and was used to that anyway, I sat down next my friend Amanda and whispered, “I’m not supposed to be in here. I’m getting my schedule changed.” Before I could continue, Mrs. Munroe started class. As she discussed the syllabus, I started to think that maybe I could stick with this class and be okay.

Yeah, I thought that until Christmas break when I felt like I was drowning in essays and annotations. I asked Mrs. Munroe if I could meet with her one day after class and when we met, I told her that I just didn’t think I could handle the class and I wanted to drop it for an honors class. She sat down at one of the desks and said, “Well, I think you’re wrong about that. You are doing a good job in this class and you are a natural writer. I really wish you’d reconsider.” I never thought that about myself before—I always thought I was just good at math. I never considered English to be my strong suit, and I was never really good at all of that analyzing. We talked about my becoming a better time manager and not letting myself get so far behind that I felt like I couldn’t catch back up. By the end of our conversation, Mrs. Munroe made me realize my potential and what I was really capable of. I started pushing myself harder and engaging more with the work and class discussions, and I ended up with an A average for the year. I even passed the AP exam in May with a score of 4! I really appreciate Mrs. Munroe realizing what I was capable of and helping me to see that I could be good at something other than math.

Junior year was also when I started cheering again, and that's where I met three friends that are still in my life today. The four of us just clicked together, and we called ourselves the Four Musketeers. Katrina and Melissa are Black, and Mary Elizabeth is White, but we all fit together so well. I had actually known Mary Elizabeth for a while since she was in a few of my honors classes, but Katrina and Melissa were new to me. Neither one of them took any honors classes, but I think Katrina took advanced English each year. Katrina and Mary Elizabeth are such introverts, and Melissa is extroverted like me, but when it came to cheering, all four of us were loud, boisterous, and enthusiastic! Most weekends, we could be found at one of our houses, having a sleepover that started after Friday night's football game and didn't end until after dinner on Sunday. I admit, it was kinda weird the first time we stayed at Mary Elizabeth's house, with her parents, two brothers, and little sister there. Katrina, Melissa, and I were the minority again, but Mary Elizabeth's mom treated us just like three more daughters, and her brothers annoyed us like we were his sisters. After football season, there weren't quite as many weekend sleepovers, but we ate lunch together every day and texted each other all the time.

When it came time to start selecting classes for senior year, I did something crazy—I let my biology teacher from sophomore year, Mrs. Bradley, talk me into taking AP Biology. I didn't even really like science that much, but I needed one more science credit for graduation and I didn't want to take environmental science or physics. Plus, I really liked Mrs. Bradley, and I knew from experience that her class would actually be fun. I knew all of the other kids in that class, a good mix of Black and White kids, and I passed the AP exam, earning another college credit. I considered taking AP Calculus my senior year, but I was nervous that, even though I was pretty good at math, I wouldn't do

well in the class. How embarrassing would that be? Me, the girl that always helped other students understand math and solve problems, not being able to pass an AP math class? I just didn't want to chance it. So, the rest of my schedule was made up of honors English, honors math, honors economics, and some easy elective classes that you could just show up to and get an A. I ended up as an honor graduate that spring and was accepted to all three colleges where I applied.

I never felt like I was uncool because I was gifted or because I was in higher-level classes. I mean, those were just the classes that I took. Once I got to high school, my friend group, especially my tight group of cheer mates, was really more outside of my classes but my being in the advanced and honors classes never seemed to bother them. When I couldn't hang out on the weekends because I had assignments or projects to do, my friends were supportive of that and never gave me a hard time. Whenever we would attend honor assemblies or such, my friends would always celebrate my academic achievements along with me. I think a little part of their supportiveness was knowing that I was a built-in tutor for them, but they really were a great group of girls that always made me feel like I fit in.

Looking back now, I really wish I took the opportunity to try more dual enrollment classes. I had a few classmates in high school who graduated just one credit short of earning their AA degree before graduation! A few of them, like the valedictorian and salutatorian, and a couple of other honor graduates took mostly AP classes, but many of them took several dual enrollment classes at the tech school, like the one I took after sophomore year. I could have gotten college credit while taking classes I needed to take anyway. By senior year, I was tired and so over high school, and I guess I just wanted to

take the easy way out. Everyone knew those tech school dual enrollment classes were a cakewalk and I really should have taken advantage of that. I think at the time, I almost felt like I was too smart for those classes, but now I see that maybe I wasn't smart enough.

One thing I definitely know is that I am very competitive with myself, even as an adult. My sophomore year of college, I was required to take a statistics class. I love statistics, and I had a great professor who happened to be the first Black male teacher I had in a long time. There was just something about his aura that made me want to do well in his class. It wasn't just because he was the professor; he made everything in class relatable to the students. When we got the syllabus during the first class, I saw that there would be four tests given that semester. On the first test, which was about a month into the semester, I made a 92. That wasn't good enough for me; I wanted to earn an even higher grade. I made an appointment with the professor and when we met, I told him, "Before I finish your class, I'm going to make a 100 on your test. Just watch." He smiled at me and said, "I think you can do it."

The second test came around and I made another 92. On the third test, I made a 95. There was only one more chance to earn a 100 on a stats test that semester! That's when I realized the need to actually study for the final test. I'm not really a studier, especially when it comes to math, because I feel like it makes me anxious and I just second-guess myself about everything. So, I took a lot of notes, went through packs of index cards, and studied for days before that final test. When the professor returned my test, there it was...I made a 100! I went up to him after class and said, "I told you! I told you I was going to make a 100 on a test!" He laughed and said, "I never doubted that you

could do it.” I put in more work and effort than before, but it was worth the pride I felt in myself once I saw my score.

It's crazy to think that in just a couple months, I am hopefully going to be the math teacher that will inspire students to believe in themselves and to try their hardest in all that they do. I pray that I have that spark that keeps my students engaged; I never want to be the teacher whose class they dread! I also hope to be able to see my students' gifts so that those gifts don't get overlooked just because the students don't fit the stereotype of a “traditional” gifted student, which, from my experience, are White, quiet, and teachers' pets. My experiences, both positive and negative, as a gifted Black student will go a long way in ensuring that other Brown and Black students get the educational opportunities that they deserve, just like I did.

Reflection

Felicia is a fresh-faced, full-of-energy beginning teacher who dreams of providing opportunities for all her students, no matter their race or socioeconomic situation. She is adamant that she will challenge all her students, regardless of ability level, with high but attainable expectations for their success. Being a self-described untraditional gifted student has, according to Felicia, given her the advantage of seeing the true gifts in all students, even when those gifts don't meet society's expectations of gifted students. While she is still embarrassed about her incident in seventh grade, Felicia credits the consequence of her actions with showing her just how much the gifted program meant to her, both back then and now.

Donovan

“I guess I’m just so used to being referred to as the token Black friend that I’ve just grown numb to it. Maybe I should be more sensitive about it and challenge Ian to simply use my name when referring to me, but I just don’t bother.”

Meet Donovan

The most recent graduate of the study’s six participants, Donovan, age 18, was the only gifted Black student in his graduating class of 285 students (comprised of 56% White students, 30% Black students, 10% Hispanic students, and 3.5% students of other races). Earning the designation of AP Scholar for scoring 3 or higher on 3 or more AP exams, Donovan was also named an honor graduate (what he considers to be his proudest accomplishment) and was accepted into the state’s premier art and design college where he will pursue a degree in writing.

Officially identified as gifted later than the other five participants (8th grade), Donovan was actually unaware of his gifted designation until he received the informational flyer for this study. He was excited to learn that he was identified as a gifted student but, as he described to me throughout his series of interviews, was unsure about how to make sense of this additional label. Like Emmanuel, Donovan did not share his story freely and often had to be asked more probing questions in order to truly illustrate his experiences as a gifted Black student.

Donovan’s Story

When I was first asked to be part of this study, I thought maybe I got the flyer by accident. I mean, I’ve always known and been told by others that I’m really smart, but it never occurred to me that I might actually be officially gifted. There were always smart

kids in my classes, and I knew that some of them had that gifted label, but I never associated that label with myself. I was always just plain old Donovan, the token Black kid in the class with the gifted White kids. No one else in my family was ever told that they were gifted, so it never really crossed my mind that I would one day find out that I was. Taking honors and AP classes was always enough for me, and having the gifted label attached to my name just wasn't that important.

Going against what I consider to be the prevailing stereotype of Black families, my parents are actually still married. My mom earned her AA degree and works as a paraprofessional for the school system I just graduated from, moving through the schools as us kids grew up. When I was at the primary school, Mom was, too. When I moved on to the elementary school, she came with me. She did that until I finished middle school, then started over at the primary school with my baby sister. My dad, who went to college and got his bachelor's degree in technology, works for a large company here in town. He's been there for a long time. He's also in the National Guard, so he stays pretty busy with trainings, especially on the weekends, but always tries to spend as much time with us as he can while he's at home.

I have two older siblings and one younger sibling. My brother Toddrick is the oldest of all us kids and is a junior at a pretty big university about 5 hours from home. Skye, my older sister, just started her sophomore year at a state college a little bit closer to home than Toddrick's school. Then there's me. I'm getting ready to start my freshman year at an art school on the coast. Finally, there's my younger sister Shar, who's in 2nd grade this year. Shar struggles quite a bit in school; she's been in a special class since kindergarten where she can get extra help with reading and math. None of us other kids

had to be in special classes like that, so it was a bit of a shock to my parents when Shar's school put her in one of those classes. Toddrick, Skye, and I were always in advanced and honors classes through school, and even though Skye struggled in those higher-level classes and chose to start taking regular classes during middle school, she was never put in one of the lower-level classes with special help. I guess we're all just a little bit different when it comes to our academic abilities. (*None of Donovan's siblings qualified as gifted eligible based on Georgia rule.*)

As a child, I was both curious and quiet. I never really said a whole lot at home or around other people out in public, except for when I was asking questions. I always wanted to know what was going on around me, whether it was how the batter my mom was mixing became a cake or why mixing red paint and blue paint made purple paint. Me and my two older siblings were always allowed to experiment with things, especially in the kitchen, and I think that nurtured my sense of curiosity even more. Sometimes, though, I think my parents wished they hadn't encouraged us quite as much as they did, since that curiosity occasionally backfired on us.

One time, I think I was around five or six, Toddrick got out this book with science experiments kids our age could do. We looked through the book, and he decided that we could do this experiment with soda and Mentos candy. There was some 2-liters of Walmart-brand soda in the cabinet, and Toddrick knew our dad had Mentos on the table next to his recliner. While me and Toddrick gathered up the materials we needed and got them all set up on the kitchen counter, Skye kept saying, "Mama and Daddy ain't going to like this when they get home. Y'all gonna get in trouble!" Looking back now, we probably should have listened to her, but at the time, all we said to her was, "Shut up!"

The book's directions said to put maybe four or five of the mints into the bottle of soda, but Toddrick and I wanted the soda to really shoot up high, so we decided to put in what was left in the wrapper. It was almost a full roll of mints. We got everything set up on the counter, Toddrick unscrewed the soda lid, and then started dropping Mentos into the bottle one at a time. After the first few mints were dropped, nothing much was happening. I was starting to feel pretty disappointed, so Toddrick said, "I bet this will make it work!" and dropped the rest of the mints into the bottle of soda. All of a sudden, we heard this rumbling sound, almost like thunder . . . and then it happened. The soda shot up out of the bottle and went everywhere: on the ceiling, on the floor, on the counter, on the fridge. There wasn't one surface in that kitchen that wasn't covered with sticky brown liquid.

While Toddrick and I were frantically scrubbing the parts of the kitchen we could reach, our parents returned from their grocery trip. When they walked into the room, they both looked up, down, and all around at the mess my brother and I made. Toddrick and I glanced at each other and braced ourselves for the punishment we knew was coming. My dad, catching sight of the experiment book on the soaking wet counter, started to grin and said to my mom, "Well, this looks like an experiment that worked too well!" He and my mom started laughing, and then they pitched in to help us clean up our scientific mess.

Since my dad was gone a lot for military training, it was usually just my mom and us three kids at the house, especially on the weekends. My older siblings and I had this interesting dynamic where we loved to gang up on each other and crack jokes at the chosen target's expense. Sometimes, me and Toddrick would get together to pick on Skye, and sometimes, Skye and I would gang up on Toddrick. Shar was always off-limits

since she was the baby, and, oddly enough, nobody ever picked on me! Well, not until I got older. Now, Toddrick and Skye pick on me for being a neat freak and liking things to be “too clean.” I remember starting arguments with them and then halfway through the argument, realizing that I was the one who was wrong. Even then, I’d just keep bearing down on them until they finally got tired of fighting, and I’d be like, “Ha! I win!”

One of those ridiculous, inconsequential arguments happened on Christmas morning when I was in fifth grade. My mom said that she was going to make a chocolate pie that day for our Christmas dinner. When I told my siblings that, Skye said, “No, she’s going to make a chocolate cake.” I said, “No, Mom just told me that she is making a pie. She didn’t say anything about making a cake.” Skye shook her head and told me that I was wrong again and said that we never ate chocolate pie on Christmas. This time I shook my head and said, “You are wrong, Skye. She said PIE!” As soon as that word left my lips, I realized that I was, indeed, the wrong one. Mom mentioned chocolate cake, not pie, and I was actually wrong. I didn’t let Skye know that, though, and I kept arguing with her until she yelled, “Fine! You win!” And there it was . . . the two words I longed to hear from both Skye and my brother. I won yet again.

When my siblings and I were younger, there weren’t really any friends outside of the house that we could hang out with. I don’t think we were ever allowed to go to other people’s houses. My father was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, and my mom has always been very religious, Christianity-wise, so they were pretty protective of us. We didn’t even get to celebrate Halloween until I was in high school! I think my parents applied those religious beliefs to many things, so we weren’t allowed to go to friends’ houses, and no one was allowed to stay over with us. But, every summer, we were enrolled in

Vacation Bible School (VBS) and at least one other type of summer camp. Recently, my mom and I were talking about this and she said, “I thought VBS would be a good way to give you guys something to do, but you all just hated it. Am I right?” Well, she was right. I did hate it because I was still really quiet and shy back then, and I hated being thrown into new situations, new atmospheres, where I didn’t know anyone but my siblings. I always just clung to my brother and sister because they were better socially than I was. As I’ve gotten older, I think I’ve gotten better, or maybe just less awkward, when it comes to social situations. Of course, I do frequently feel like the oddest duck in the pond, and I hang out with some pretty odd ducks!

In general, I liked the idea of going to school and was excited to start kindergarten. I wanted to be like my brother and sister, who had both been going to school for a few years by the time I was ready for kindergarten. I wanted to play with other kids who weren’t my siblings, and I wanted to learn more things beyond what I was learning from my parents and from *Sesame Street*. I knew my numbers, shapes, colors, and letters, and I was even reading easy sight-word books by then, but my curious mind wanted to learn even more. Toddrick and Skye both came home from school with books with fewer pictures and more words than my books, as well as math worksheets where buttons and teddy bears were used to solve problems. I wanted access to these things, too! It wasn’t fair that I wasn’t getting on that big yellow bus and going to this magical place called school, and I was totally eager to start.

My earliest school memory is probably from kindergarten. Anna Kate, who was White, and I were in the same class, and we became friends the first day of school. One time, she and I were sitting on the rug, playing with some of those wooden blocks, trying

to see how high we could get the stack. All of a sudden, this kid named Logan, who was also White, came over and kicked our beautiful block tower, knocking the blocks onto Anna Kate's head. Anna Kate looked at Logan, then looked at me, and then started crying. I mean, she was wailing! Our teacher Miss Elizabeth came over and asked Anna Kate what happened, but Anna Kate was crying so hard, she couldn't talk. It was up to me to tell Miss Elizabeth the situation and stand up for my friend. As I opened my mouth, Logan yelled, "Donovan did it! He knocked the blocks down and they fell on Anna Kate's head! I told him not to, but he did it on purpose!" I was shocked! I couldn't believe this kid just lied to Miss Elizabeth! And Anna Kate couldn't defend me because she was crying so hard and couldn't breathe. I'll never forget the disappointed look on Miss Elizabeth's face when she said, "Donovan, I am so disappointed in you. I thought Anna Kate was your friend. You will need to sit in time-out and think about what you did." By then, I was ready to defend myself, but when I saw Anna Kate still crying and Logan just smiling, I just took my punishment and walked over to the time-out chair in the corner. I don't think Miss Elizabeth ever found out what really happened with the blocks that day.

Thinking back on that day now, 14 years later, I actually get really mad. I can't believe that Logan lied to the teacher and actually got away with it. I can't believe that Anna Kate didn't stick up for me and tell Miss Elizabeth the truth. And I can't believe that I didn't stand up for myself and tell the teacher what really happened. I think, no, I know, that the same thing wouldn't have happened if Anna Kate, Logan, and Miss Elizabeth weren't all White or if I wasn't Black. I would have told Miss Elizabeth the truth if she were Black because I would have felt more comfortable with her. I believe

she would have questioned Logan's version of what happened if she were Black or if I were White. Would Logan have dared lie to Miss Elizabeth if either she or I were a different race? That I don't know. But I do know that Anna Kate apologized to me years later in fourth grade when Logan was in our class again. I accepted her apology, and we were friends again by that point anyway, but neither of us talked to Logan again. He didn't go on to middle school with us, so he just didn't matter anymore.

From kindergarten through most of third grade, most of the friends in my friend groups came and went. There were a few close friends that were constants, but the peripheral friends were often switched out. Most of my friends back in elementary school were girls and all of my friends were White, but we enjoyed playing together, doing things like going to the far corner of the playground during recess to look for roly-polies when we were in second grade. In third grade, Phil, who was Black, started at our school and joined our little friend group that we named DIA (for Donovan is Awesome). One time, the members of DIA got into a disagreement about who the leader of the group was, and I was like, "It's obviously me because the name of our group is actually, literally DONOVAN is Awesome!" Someone else, maybe Clara, said, "No, I think Phil should be the leader of the group." That made no sense to me, mainly because the group wasn't called Phil is Awesome. Everyone else started piping in, saying Phil should be the leader, until Phil himself said, "No, I think Donovan needs to be the leader. The group isn't called PIA." We went back to normal, with the other members of the group pretending to be my bodyguards. Why, exactly, did I need bodyguards in third grade? Every Friday, I paid my bodyguards in those soft peppermints my mom bought by the tubs. I was a pretty cheap employer; I only gave each bodyguard two peppermints per week. I enjoyed being

the leader, being in charge of my friends, even though I still felt pretty awkward around other kids.

Fourth grade, which was the last year of elementary school before heading off to the middle school, brought a few more friend changes. There was no more DIA group (we were much too cool and mature for something so silly, and my mom got tired of me taking her peppermints), but Phil, Clara, and I still hung out together at lunch and at recess. We also added Anna Kate and Maggie (both White) to our group, and sometimes Vince, a Hispanic migrant student who just moved to town, would hang out with us, too. One day, we were all out on the playground, talking about Pokémon, when Ritchie, this skinny little White kid, came over to us and told Vince, “You better be careful. If you keep hanging around with them, you’ll end up White like Donovan and Phil.” Then Ritchie laughed and ran back over to his group of friends. Phil and I just looked at each other, and then we both looked at Vince, who looked confused. He asked, “What does that mean? You guys are not White.” I could tell Phil was getting angry, so I decided to answer Vince. “What Ritchie meant,” I started, “was that since Phil and I are friends with mostly White kids, he thinks we are acting like we’re White.” I still don’t think Vince really understood the concept, but we dropped it and went back to talking about Pokémon.

When it came to the educational part of elementary school, I enjoyed that, too. School just seemed to naturally come easy to me. I was always in the smart classes, according to my mom, and I always seemed to be one of the top kids in the class each year. Back then, I possessed this drive to be the best I could be at everything. I don’t really remember competing with my classmates when it came to school and grades back

then, but I do remember competing with myself. Does that make sense? I never really cared what grades Anna Kate, Phil, or my other friends earned; I just wanted to be at the top because I knew that's where I could be. If I made a 96% on a test, I was down on myself for not making a 97%. If I was working on a drawing, I had to make myself stop, mainly by giving the drawing away to my parents or siblings, because I always thought I could make the drawing even better, more colorful, more detailed. Things changed a bit as I got older, and I did start comparing myself with some of my peers, but I've always been more competitive with the guy I see in the mirror.

In fifth grade, a new program for high-achieving kids was created—the Inspire Program. Because of this new program, the classmates I was with forever and I joined several other students on a high-achieving academic team of four teachers who taught advanced and honors classes. At first, I didn't really understand what those two terms, advanced and honors, truly meant, but they sounded impressive! The first day of school, the (*White*) teachers put all of us students (probably 90 or so kids) in one room and talked to us about how challenging our classes were going to be and that they were going to expect a lot out of us that year. I really liked the sound of that! It was like it was official that me and my friends were really smart and so were these other kids that were now in classes with us. Our teachers often referred to us as “the cream of the crop,” and I wanted to live up to that description. A few of the newer students didn't seem to care about the teachers' expectations, and they didn't stay in our classes very long.

I'm not going to lie—those fifth-grade classes were so hard! I didn't mind, though, because I really liked the challenge. The teachers didn't want us to just memorize information for a test; they wanted us to actually learn information and be able to apply it

in different scenarios. We analyzed primary documents in social studies and then wrote paragraphs explaining our analysis. In math, it wasn't enough to just solve a basic old problem—you were expected to explain how you solved the problem and then come up with your own problem for a classmate to solve. We were allowed to do the coolest science experiments in the science lab; I think we were the only fifth graders that actually used the lab that year. English was pretty much still just English, but our teacher allowed us, even encouraged us, to read more challenging books she kept in her classroom library. I was excited about these new opportunities to show off just how smart I was!

That year, I was really into the *Captain Underpants* books. My favorite hobbies were drawing and writing, and the *Captain Underpants* books contained both comic-style drawings and humorous stories. I read every one of those books I could find, and when I read all of them in the school library, I started over, reading each one again. Those books inspired me to write and illustrate my own comic book, which I titled *Potty Pup*. I designed it as a spin-off of *Captain Underpants*, and Potty Pup became the Captain's superhero dog. After I finished with *Potty Pup*, I decided to create a comic for each of the kids in my homeroom class. Each student would be the main character in his or her own comic, and I would give them out as Christmas presents. It was a perfect plan! I asked Mr. Graham, my homeroom and social studies teacher, for a roster of students so I wouldn't accidentally leave anyone out. I took that list of names, gathered up the supplies I would need, and started working on my masterpieces.

I worked for weeks on those comic books. There were 20 other kids in my homeroom class beside me, and I wanted each one of the 20 comic books to be perfect. I used high-quality paper for the books' pages and construction paper for the covers. I used

glitter pens to decorate the covers of the books and wrote each title in fancy, almost-cursive letters. In each book, which was 12 pages long and bound with twine, the main character would learn a lesson focused on self-appreciation and acceptance. I created an alliterative name for each main character, such as Absentminded Anna-Kate, Clumsy Carly, and Silly Shawn. When I got to Lauren's name, I thought a little longer about whom I wanted her main character to be. Finally, it came to me—Loser Lauren! Now, I know that name sounds bad, but the story was about how everyone around Lauren called her a loser and how she proved them wrong. Lauren was, of course, the hero in the story, so I didn't think of Loser Lauren as being a negative name. A few days before Christmas break, I brought all 20 comic books, wrapped in red and green ribbon, to school and handed them out during homeroom. My classmates were all so excited and began opening their books. They started reading and everyone was smiling . . . until they weren't.

The bell rang, and we went to our next class, and I tried to stop wondering why my friends didn't seem to like their books. Later that day, when it was time to go to PE, Mr. Graham asked me to stay behind so he could talk to me. He proceeded to tell me that Lauren was very upset about the name of her book and called her mom, crying, saying that I made the book just to be mean to Lauren. I tried to tell Mr. Graham that was the absolute opposite from the reason why I wrote the books, but he wouldn't hear of it. He sent me to the guidance counselor, Mr. King, who just talked to me about the books and actually got the purpose of the books. Mr. King said he wasn't going to call my mom since I wasn't really in trouble, but he suggested that the next time I wanted to give my classmates a gift, I explain the gift to them first. My creativity was tampered a bit for a

while after the book debacle, but by the time I entered high school, it was back. (By the way, my math teacher Mrs. Sheldon told me that she loved her comic, *Stinky Sheldon*.)

Something even worse than my book present fiasco also happened in fifth grade—I was called the N-word for the first time. Well, maybe it wasn't the first time, but it was the first time I was aware of being called that horrible name. Our class was standing in the hall, waiting to be allowed into the bathroom, three kids at a time. There was another class, from a different academic team, that was lined up on the opposite wall, also waiting to use the restroom. Mrs. Sheldon called for the next three boys to enter the restroom at the same time the other teacher told a couple of her boys to go in, as well. One of those (*White*) boys from the other class named Jordan, who wore cowboy boots every day, even in PE, walked into the restroom at the same time I did. I guess I brushed up against him or something when we both tried to go through the entryway at the same time. Jordan turned around and said, "Watch it or I'll make you my N-word." I didn't really think much of it, but a few of Jordan's friends who were also in the restroom went "Ooooo!" Then they started laughing and pointing at me. I did my business, washed my hands, and walked back to my classroom.

After class, Mrs. Sheldon pulled me aside and asked me, "What did that boy say to you in the restroom?" I just shrugged my shoulders, so she asked me again. I responded with, "He said the N-word, but it was no big deal. I don't care what other people say about me." I went to my next class and didn't think about Jordan again until that night when my mom called me into the kitchen. She pointed to a chair, and I sat down, wondering what I had done this time. Mom sat down next to me and asked, "Did a boy call you a name today?" I just looked at the table but stayed quiet. She asked me

again, “Did a boy call you a name today?” I knew I better answer her, so I said, “Yeah, I guess. But it’s no big deal, Mom. I don’t care what other people think of me.” My mom looked at me incredulously and shook her head. “Why aren’t you taking this more seriously, Donny? You should never allow anyone to use that word towards you!” I couldn’t think of an answer for that question back then, and I’m not sure how I would answer that question today, but I do now realize how serious that slur was, especially coming from a fifth grade kid.

Sixth grade was the best year of middle school. The teachers were energetic, and their classes were never boring. In fifth grade, I felt like the main difference between my honors classes and the regular classes was the amount of work that was assigned. The fifth grade teachers gave so much work but it wasn’t very fun or engaging. Mr. Graham made us do a million Frayer models whenever we got new vocabulary words, which was all the time. But sixth grade was different. We took Spanish starting in sixth grade, in addition to math, English, science, and social studies. All five teachers let us do projects and assignments that were fun and educational, and many times, we were actually allowed to choose from a menu of assignments and pick the ones we liked the best. When we read the book *Holes* in English class, our teacher Mrs. Dowdy gave us a tic-tac-toe board of assignments we could choose from. The only requirement was that we pick three in a row (either vertically, horizontally, or diagonally). Wouldn’t you know it . . . one of the choices was to create a comic book! I couldn’t believe it! I was actually being given the option to create a comic book! And that wasn’t the only creative option on the board—you could create a diorama; you could write a poem; you could choose from nine options that weren’t boring at all! It wasn’t just Mrs. Dowdy’s class that was like that. All

of our teachers made learning interesting and engaging while also making it challenging. That's the main reason why I worked so hard in class that year. I didn't want to disappoint my teachers who were working so hard to help us learn.

Another reason why sixth grade was such a good year was the fact that I was no longer the only Black kid in my classes. Once classes started being a bit more leveled in fourth grade, my face became the only Brown one in the room. Phil was not in classes with me anymore, so my fourth and fifth grade classes looked like clean white sheets with a speck of black dirt. I didn't really mind it, since most of my friends were White anyway, but I guess it meant something to me if I still remember it all these years later. But in sixth grade, the gates of the higher-level classes were opened up to even more smart kids, not just those of us that had been together for a while. There were White kids, of course, but there were also Black kids, Hispanic kids, and an Asian kid. (*Donovan's sixth grade academic team consisted of 64% White students, 31.5% Black students, 4.1% Hispanic students, and 0.4% Asian students.*) We all just kind of gelled and became like a little family. In fact, Ms. North, my homeroom teacher, always called us her little family. I still had classes with my friends like Shawn and Anna Kate, but I also made new friends, such as Ian, who became my best friend, and Emmett, who was quiet like me. Okay, those two guys are bad examples of diversity because they are both White. But wait! There's more! Jasmine (*Hispanic*), Joaquin (*Black*), and Cole (*White*) also became close friends of mine, and we ate lunch together almost every day, talking about video games and comics, and other subjects comfortable to us nerds. These were my people, and I was excited to be with them.

Seventh grade was pretty unmemorable for me. The teachers were a lot meaner than the ones from sixth grade, and they overloaded us with tons of busy work and homework that just didn't seem to matter. We were still a pretty diverse Inspire academic team that year (*62% White students, 33% Black students, 4.6% Hispanic students, and 0.4% Asian students*), and that was the first year I ever had a Hispanic teacher (*Donovan's Spanish teacher was Hispanic*). Of course, all of the other teachers were White women, but I was used to that by then, so it was no big deal. I still ate lunch with my sixth-grade group of friends, and we even added a couple of kids, Izabelle and Rontrez, to the group. We were a pretty hodgepodge group of friends, but it worked well for us.

Eighth grade was a big screw-up, academically-speaking. That year, I was supposed to be in Algebra I and ninth-grade literature. I remember being really excited because that meant I would be earning two high school credits while still in middle school. Well, there was only one Algebra I class offered, and I guess that by the time the scheduling elf got to my name, there was no room in the class for any more students. So, three other students and I were put in an advanced math class and made to sit together in the back of the room where we worked on honors-level math but not Algebra I. I was also left out of the one ninth-grade literature class, again because of scheduling issues, and wound up in an honors eighth-grade language arts class. I mentioned this to my mom at the end of the first week of school, and even though she spoke to the guidance counselor and the assistant principal, no changes were made to my schedule that year. I felt like I was really shortchanged, not being allowed to earn those two high school credits that I

desperately wanted to get that year. But, I believe that everything happens for a reason, even if I still don't know what that reason was.

Probably the best part of eighth grade was that Ian and I became even closer that year, a kind of dynamic duo of brains, weirdness, and humor. Ian suffers from social anxiety disorder, and it is hard for him to make friends and be in social situations, and I guess he just found a kindred spirit in me. Lacking social etiquette, he would do some pretty strange things, especially in science where the teacher was pretty laissez-faire with classroom discipline. For example, one time, Ian went around the room and stole pencils off of everyone's desk. He just dropped the collection of pencils in his backpack and went about the day as if nothing happened. Since I was always with Ian, I often got in trouble, too, when he decided to do these weird things. Once, Mr. Whittington, the science teacher, was up at the board teaching and Ian decided to lift my desk up really high off the ground. He acted like he was going to let it go, so I tried to grab onto it before it hit the floor. I failed, and when the desk hit the floor with a loud thud, Mr. Whittington turned around and asked, "Donovan, what are you doing?" I couldn't think of a good answer, so I just stared at the floor. After school that day, Mr. Whittington went and found my mom (who was working at the middle school that year) and told her about how I was goofing off while he was teaching. I got into trouble for that, but I didn't get mad at Ian or blame him for it. I felt like his social anxiety disorder had a lot to do with his actions, and he was never doing it to be mean-spirited, so I couldn't really blame him, could I?

Ah, high school. I think people either love high school or hate high school; I don't think there is an in-between. I personally enjoyed the high school experience, both the

social aspect and the educational aspect. Even though high school provided some amazing opportunities for me, the beginning of freshman year was a bit frightening. When eighth grade ended, so did the Inspire Program, and those of us who were in that program for 4 years were seemingly just tossed into the wind. In middle school, those of us in the Inspire Program were completely segregated from the students who weren't in the program, almost like we were part of a gated community. We sat on different sides of the lunchroom and rarely passed each other in the halls. But high school was different—there was no more official Inspire Program, and even though there were advanced and honors classes offered to us all, those of us from the program were no longer separated from the general population of students. That meant being in classes with new people, eating lunch with new people, getting to know new people. The weirdest part, though, was that after being told for 4 years that we [the Inspire kids] were the cream of the crop, the best of the best, we found out we really weren't. I mean, we were now in classes with those “other kids” who weren't part of the cream of the crop group. Did that mean that I really wasn't one of the best and brightest, or did that mean that the non-Inspire students were just as good as we were? I still don't know the answer to that one, and I'm not sure I want to find out.

Even though I was no longer part of a close-knit academic group of high achievers, I still wanted to do my very best. This, I believe, is what made me more competitive with my friends and classmates. I felt pretty good about my classes freshman year, except for ninth-grade literature. Since that course was offered as an honors class to eighth graders, there was no honors option for the course at the high school. This meant that I was in a regular English class with kids I mostly did not know, and most of the

class was Black. I guess I possessed a bit of a superiority complex, especially after being told for so long that I was part of the smartest kids in my grade, and I actually looked down on the regular education students in that English class. I was so bored in that class, all of the work was so easy, and there was no one I could talk to. But, I was friendly with everyone in the class, and I eventually ended up becoming good friends with Caitlin (*White*) and Avery (*Black*) that year. I learned that most of the students in that class weren't actually dumb, like I thought they would be, but they just didn't have the intrinsic motivation or drive to do better than they did. And while that is hard, almost impossible, for me to understand, I no longer look down on them for it.

Sophomore year was the year I took my first AP class, which was AP US history. Pretty much anyone was allowed to take that class, even if they hadn't been in honors world history the year before. We started the year with a full classroom of students of all races, but by the end of the first quarter, we were down to about a dozen of us and I, again, was the only Black kid left. Mrs. Nelms, the teacher, was really hard on us, and if you weren't already a pretty strong writer, she was going to make you work even harder. Her assignments really made you think critically about history and focused heavily on inquiry, not on remembering a bunch of names, dates, and facts. I think that intimidated the students that had not been in honors classes before, so instead of sticking it out and trying to get acclimated to that type of challenging class, they took the easy way out and withdrew from the course. I know that it wasn't entirely the fault of the kids; they should have had early access to more challenging classes that prepared them for an AP class down the road, but it just wasn't available for them. Those were the kids that went on to take a lot of dual enrollment classes during junior and senior years, earning that

guaranteed college credit at the technical school instead of taking a gamble on earning a passing score on an AP exam. Maybe those kids were smarter than the rest of us, after all.

Junior year was more of the same: hanging out with the same friends and taking more honors and AP classes. That was the year that I fell even more in love with art, especially drawing. In fact, one of my drawings with a cartoonish vibe won an honorable mention award at a state art competition. Earning that award just solidified my desire to go to art college and turn my hobby into a career. I didn't get to practice my hobby much outside of art class, though, because I was taking three AP classes that year: world history, focus, and seminar. I loved the seminar class because we were allowed to research topics that interested us as individuals and complete both written and performance-based projects on those topics. Sometimes we worked in teams, but because several of my friends were in that class and we had a lot of the same interests, that was no big deal. I was still the only Black kid in most of my classes with the exception of honors visual arts. Avery, whom I had met in freshman English, and Terrance, who was new to the school that year, were talented artists, and we spent a lot of time talking about art and sharing our portfolio pieces with each other. Talking with Avery and Terrance was different from talking to my other (*White*) friends, mostly because all we had in common was art. They weren't in the same academic classes I was in, and they weren't interested in nerdy stuff like Pokémon or Dungeons and Dragons. We never hung out together outside of art class, but we would speak to each other if we passed in the hallways. They were neat guys and I considered them my friends, even though we were really only friends because of our love of art.

While junior year was mostly blah, senior year was filled with amazing achievements! I was named prom king, my second proudest achievement, and I earned the title of “Most Memorable” of the entire senior class. I did lose out on being voted class president, but I was so busy with my six AP classes plus my part-time job at the movie theater that it probably was a good thing that I lost the election. I was accepted into my dream art college, and I found out that Ian, my best friend, and I would be roommates freshman year! While we knew that our majors would be different, mine would be creative writing and his would be film/television, it was exciting to know that we could possibly collaborate on some of our assignments. At the end of senior year, I was named an honor graduate and an AP Scholar, and I was extremely proud of those accomplishments. I knew that I worked hard all through high school (shoot, all through middle school, too), and it paid off.

My high school experience, while amazing, was not without its share of awkward encounters with racism. During Christmas break of sophomore year, I started working at a local fast food restaurant. By this time, I knew which college I wanted to attend, and I knew that it was going to take every penny I could make to get there. One afternoon at work, I was working the drive-thru, and a woman came through the line, placed her order, and drove up to the window. When I opened the glass to tell the (*Black*) woman her total, she just stared at me. I repeated her total and when she handed me her cash, she asked, “Were you the one taking my order back there?” I smiled and said, “Yes, ma’am, that was me.” She looked at me quizzically and said, “Huh. I sure thought by your voice that you were a White boy.” I wasn’t sure how to respond, so I said, “No, ma’am, I’m not,” while I handed her the order and wished her a good day. She drove off, and my

coworker, who was also standing at the window and heard the conversation, asked, “Did she just say that you talked White?” I just shrugged and went back to taking orders.

That incident at the drive-thru window bothered me more than I let on to my coworker or to the woman who basically said I was trying to sound White. I mean, how does White sound? Then I thought about how my mom would always tell us kids that we spoke more proper than she did. She said that we didn’t use much slang and that we “didn’t sound like we just came out of a cotton field.” When I was younger, I didn’t really know what that meant, but now I realize that she was equating using slang and speaking the way she speaks with sounding Black, like a sharecropper or worse, like a slave. I never thought of my mom as sounding uneducated or unintelligent, but now I see that she probably felt that way since my siblings and I do speak more formally than our parents. It’s all about stereotypes, though, and I’m just trying to do my thing, staying on the path I want to be on, not changing just because someone else thinks I need to change. Every part of me is important, and I like all of the parts that make me, me.

Another awkward situation happened in 12th grade. For once, I wasn’t the only Black kid in an AP class! Jamarcus, who was a junior and ranked at the top of his class, was also in AP literature with me that year. He was a very quiet kid, even more of an introvert than I am, and because he was a year younger than me and was totally virtual the year before, I didn’t really know him much at all. Around December, we started studying the Harlem Renaissance, learning about W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and, of course, Langston Hughes. Being such a literature lover, I enjoyed getting to read and analyze works by these amazing Black writers, but what I did not enjoy was the focus that seemed to be placed on Jamarcus and me whenever we would have class

discussions. Our AP lit teacher Mrs. Young, who was White, loved class discussions, and when a discussion would come up regarding the Harlem Renaissance, she and the rest of the class would look at us two Black kids. Of course, not only were Jamarcus and I Black, but we were also the two quietest kids in the class, so it was even more awkward when everyone was looking at us, waiting for us to give our Black opinions. Of course, this was never said outright, but that feeling was there.

I am very aware of my role as the token Black friend in the group. In fact, that is what my best friend Ian calls me to this day. When he introduces me to anyone, he'll say, "This is my token Black friend Donovan, who is my best friend." That's even how he introduced me to his mom, and "My Black friend Donovan" is my contact name in his phone. I take it all in stride, though. I guess I'm just so used to being referred to as the token Black friend that I've just grown numb to it. Maybe I should be more sensitive about it and challenge Ian to simply use my name when referring to me, but I just don't bother. I am secure enough in my identity as a Black male that I can handle this racially-focused epithet.

My life would be very different if I had not been part of the Inspire Program or allowed to take upper-level classes. I don't think I would have the drive to be the best that I could be if I wasn't around other kids with that same ambition. Don't get me wrong—sometimes I wished I could take an easier course than the one I was taking, but in my heart, I know that I would have been bored and would have gotten lazy. Would I have still made friends? Of course, and more of those friends would have probably been Black, but I would just be lollygagging about with no real destination in mind. Without that intrinsic motivation to be the best, I know that I would have never been accepted into my

first-choice art college. Being in Inspire, honors classes, and AP classes really prepared me to face challenges, taught me how to persevere, and molded me into the honor graduate I became. I definitely consider myself a public-school success story.

As for my future, my after-college life, I would love to write and illustrate children's books. I love literature, I love art, and I love writing, so becoming an author-illustrator would combine all of my passions into one fulfilling career. Occasionally, I'll take out the little stories I wrote when I was younger, and I'll dream of turning them into a published, illustrated collection of stories. Or maybe I'll expand on some of them and turn them into full-fledged books. I want to be the author and illustrator that helps to fill the gap of diverse characters in children's literature. Growing up, there were not many opportunities for me to read about a Black main character. In fact, I can't think of one single book with a Black male protagonist off the top of my head. It's hard enough when there are no Black teachers for kids like me to look up to (unless, of course, it's a PE coach), and while I don't know what I can do to remedy that situation, I can provide more diverse reading opportunities for Black children. All kids need role models, and I'd love to give Black kids realistic heroes. That would then become my proudest achievement: giving Black children, and really children of any race, the chance to see what they can truly become.

Three weeks after our final interview, I received an email from Donovan in which he described an additional vignette that happened just 2 days prior to his email to me. He wrote, "The other day I was reminded of something that pertained to something I talked about in my last interview." I included this additional lived experience below.

It's the end of August and my friends and I are all getting ready to go our separate ways for college. Before leaving for various parts of the state, I got together with my friend Cole and one of his friends, Randy, who are both White, for a night of video games at Cole's house. We were drinking sodas and eating pizza, and I didn't want to make a water ring on the coffee table, so I asked Cole, "Where do you keep your coasters?" Before Cole could answer, Randy piped in. "Coasters? Man, you are so White!" Cole then decided to chime in and said, "That's why we always hung out with you, Donovan. You're an Oreo." Randy asked, "Why do you call him an Oreo?" like I wasn't standing right there. "Oh, you know," started Cole. "He's Black on the outside but White on the inside!" All of a sudden, I remembered that some of the kids in my classes back in middle school would call me an Oreo . . . I guess I blocked it from my mind. I didn't really have a response, and we went back to playing our game. If I cared more about what Cole thought of me, I think it would hurt, but I don't. I just think he's showing his ignorance to continue to use that term to describe me. It would be fine to acknowledge that he used to say that about me when we were stupid young kids, but the fact that he continues to use something that perpetuates racism and stereotypes is pretty dumb of him.

Reflection

Although Donovan was named prom king as well as Most Memorable during his senior year, he was very soft-spoken and contemplative during his three interviews. Several times after I asked him a question, he would respond with, "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel about that" or "I never really thought about how being Black affected my interactions with my peers." Donovan also appeared to be uncomfortable talking

about himself, often looking at his hands in his lap or closing his eyes for a moment. I would offer subtle reminders that I wanted to learn about his lived experiences and that I wasn't looking for a "right" answer. He would then smile, take a deep breath, and talk some more, regaining confidence in speaking about his life. Because he seemed to be so cautious during his interviews, I was surprised when Donovan reached out to me via email once our time together was over. He was quite guarded during his interviews, so I knew the additional experience he shared with me was really important and impacted him in a way he may not have experienced before.

During all three of Donovan's interviews, I got the feeling that he was resigned to the fact that being known as the token Black friend or being referred to as an Oreo was just the way things were in his life and in society in general. When I would question him about his feelings whenever these microaggressions would occur, Donovan would shrug and say, "That's just how it is," bringing to mind Ladson-Billings' (2021) suggestion that students "could not imagine any other alternatives to the current racial hierarchy" (p. 229). The gifted teacher in me wanted to exclaim, "But that's not how it should be!" but I checked my Teacher of Gifted Students subjective I and remembered my role as researcher in our relationship.

Reggie

"Because of my behavior, they took my education away from me."

Meet Reggie

Reggie is a 22-year-old college senior majoring in psychology at a local public state university. Due to his work and school schedules, all interviews were conducted virtually via Google Meet, an online video conferencing tool. A high school football

standout, Reggie attended an out-of-state Division I school before transferring to a smaller Division II school closer to home. No longer being offered athletic scholarships, his collegiate football days came to an end.

During the second interview, Reggie began telling the story that changed the trajectory of his life. He seemed to be lost in the story; it was almost like he was right back there in the locker room, reliving that fateful day. Reggie became so engrossed in telling his story that it took up the bulk of our time together that day. I didn't prod him to move on because I wanted to hear everything about this event that he claims was the most defining of his young life. Right before the scheduled date of our final interview, Reggie found out that he and his girlfriend were expecting their first baby. This news, plus his getting a promotion at work, made him miss our scheduled interview. I tried two times to reschedule the final interview with Reggie, but he would not respond to my texts, emails, or calls. I was quite disappointed by this, as I thought we developed a trusting relationship, and I was eager to hear more of what he had to say.

Reggie's Story

I am truly blessed to come from such a loving, tight-knit family. For a while, my immediate family consisted of my mom, my older brother Daniel, and me. My biological dad wasn't really around, but when I was about 6, my mom met and married my stepdad, and that's the man I consider to be my real dad. I still love my biological dad, but he just wasn't in my life like my stepdad. I don't blame him or judge him for that; it's just the way life goes. I wouldn't change the way I grew up for anything. My brother and I got everything we needed and most everything we wanted: food, clothing, electronics, and

video games. We worked on the weekends to earn some of that stuff, but that just made me and Daniel appreciate what we got even more.

My parents have always been my role models. Barbara, my mom, is amazing. She graduated high school but didn't go on to college. She just didn't think college was for her. "I was just an average student," she would say when I'd ask her about when she was in school. She just wanted to start working after she graduated, so she got a job with the city of Union Grove, and after working there for 25 years, was just named the main supervisor earlier this year. Mom always wanted even better for my brother and me, wanted us to get the opportunity to go to college and get a degree that would benefit us for life. She worked hard her entire adult life to make that happen.

My dad Melvin is the epitome of the man I want to be. He's an entrepreneur and is widely known in the community. Everybody in town seem to know him. He's one of those men who leads more by example than by words. Never the type to talk too much, but he let the rules of the house be known. I've never seen or heard my dad do anything wrong to my mom or anyone else, for that matter. He's calm and collected, and he lets his actions speak for him. One thing, though, is when he do speak, the whole room listens because people know he'll say something important since he don't normally say much. My dad always showed up for my football games and my honor roll assemblies, and I loved him for that. He was usually one of the only, if not the only, Black father there, especially for academic assemblies. That always made me feel super proud.

Daniel, my brother, is 4 years older than me, and other than my parents, he's the person I look up to the most. We're pretty different from each other, with different interests and different priorities, but we've always been close. For a while, my parents

weren't sure that he would make it out of high school. His grades were okay, but his behavior kept him in the principal's office a lot! But, he made it through, and graduated from college last year with a degree in criminal justice. Right now, he's in Atlanta, working with young kids who are mentally disabled. He also works security at Atlanta Falcons games, but his true love is working with the kids. He tries to teach me about women, but I'm the one with the long-term girlfriend, so I don't take his advice about women too seriously.

Before I even turned one, my biological dad was out of the picture, so me, my mom, and Daniel packed up and moved in with my maternal grandparents. They owned a farmhouse out in the country, and although there was lots of land to play on, the house wasn't all that big. It got even smaller when my mom's two sisters and their kids moved in, plus my uncle and his son. There was 11 of us living in that one house! All of the boy cousins shared a room, and all of the girl cousins shared another room. I learned a lot about sharing during those years, learned about making the most out of every meal because there was a lot of heads in that house. Then when I turned six, my mom met my dad, and the four of us moved into a tiny apartment with two bedrooms and one big room that was the kitchen, dining room, and living room together. Even though we missed our cousins and grandparents, we were happy to be out of my grandparents' house, but we were even happier when, 2 years later, we were able to move into our own house. That was a shock! Me and Daniel each had our own rooms, and we no longer took baths together! It felt like we were living in a mansion, and we loved it! Looking back now, I realize that having to live in my grandparents' house and in that tiny apartment really made me appreciate all my parents did to get us a house of our own.

Even though I liked books, educational shows, and learning new things, I was not ready to go to daycare when I was 3! My mom has told me that even when I was that young, I would try all of the high school tricks to get out of school, like acting sick or pretending to be asleep. If she could get me into the car, I would fight my mom every time she tried to drop me off at Learning Stars Daycare! I would cry, kick, beg my mom not to make me go, and she would get the teacher to help her drag me out of the car and into the building. Once the day got started and I saw the other kids, I would be okay, but getting me into the daycare was a nightmare! According to my mom, I really liked the strawberry oatmeal we got for breakfast there, so maybe that's why I calmed down when I finally got inside. I've always loved to eat!

Things changed a bit once I started pre-kindergarten. That's when I actually remember stuff, my own memories, instead of just having my mom tell me about school. I was four and was just starting Wondering Minds, which is where most county kids went to preschool, and I was having fun. We learned some things, but I mostly remember playing dress up, playing in the pretend kitchen, and playing out in the yard. All of us kids played together: White kids, Black kids, boy, girls. We was just kids being kids, having fun together. That's also when I met one of my lifelong best friends, Taylor. Me and Taylor, who was White, was in the same class and we just hit it off right away. We always played together, whether it was outside on the playground or inside with the blocks. He and I even came to school dressed like firefighters that year on Halloween! That was totally unplanned, but that just supported our argument that we shared a brain! Taylor's mom, Ms. Tiffany, took so many pictures of us dressed up alike, and my mom still keeps one of those pictures on her refrigerator. Ms. Tiffany was always helping out

in the class, and she treated me just like another son, so a lot of my younger memories include her and Taylor. It made me sad when I found out that Taylor was going to attend kindergarten in the other school system because we had gotten so close. But, I was a friendly kid, and my mom assured me that there would be tons of new friends to meet and play with once I started real school.

Another one of my friends from when I was preschool age was Bryson, who was White. He didn't go to my preschool, but his older brother Reid and my brother Daniel were best friends. They played baseball together, so my family knew his family pretty well. My mom and Bryson's mom were tight from sitting together at all of those baseball games. My brother would go stay the night at their house sometimes, and Reid would come stay at our house, too. Since Bryson and I were the younger brothers hanging out together at the baseball games, we'd just go off to the side and play tag or draw in the dirt. We never really paid much attention to the baseball games! Bryson and I actually ended up in the same kindergarten class, which was bad news for our teacher! We liked to talk and make each other laugh instead of paying attention and that got us a lot of frowny faces on our sticker charts!

Let me just go ahead and get this out of the way—when I was younger, I was bad as hell! It definitely wasn't because of a bad childhood; my childhood was good. I was a happy kid, I had a good family, and I had a strong community around me. I was taught to love everybody and respect everybody, and that's how we all treated each other in my family. I just possessed this bit of a rebellious streak, and I just felt like if I wasn't hurting anybody, then being a little bit bad and rebellious wasn't anything too serious.

Sometimes, though, someone else did end up getting hurt, although it really was never intentional.

In kindergarten, my sweet (*White*) teacher was named Ms. Tori. She was so nice to all of us kids, and she would even bake us cookies and cupcakes when we were extra good! The only bad part of Ms. Tori's class was when it was naptime. I hated taking naps because I just wanted to keep on playing and learning. Well, one day, I just really wasn't trying to go to sleep like everyone else was. I wasn't bothering anyone; I just wanted to stay up by myself and not go to sleep. Ms. Tori was trying to get me away from the other kids who were trying to nap, but I just wasn't having it. She picked me up to move me, and I started having a tantrum. I knocked her glasses off her face, and she just looked at me, startled, before putting me back on the reading rug. That was it. I didn't get sent to timeout or to the principal's office, so I thought I was in the clear. Yeah, I was wrong. I guess Ms. Tori called my mom that afternoon, because when I got home, I got a whooping from my mom, another one from my granddaddy, and one more from my grandma. I got three rounds of whoopings! I think that was the most trouble I ever got in when I was in elementary school. Of course, the next day, I went to Ms. Tori and apologized to her. She smiled at me and said, "Today is a new day." But when she called us to the reading carpet that day, I couldn't sit down because, man, those whoopings really hurt!

Right after Christmas in kindergarten, another teacher, Ms. Angie, came and got me, Bryson, and another White boy named Hunter, and took us to the library to draw some pictures. Each of us sat down at our own little table while Ms. Angie put some booklets in front of us. She gave us some pencils and a big pink eraser and said, "You are

going to look at some pages with dots on them and some pages with lines on them. I want you to use those dots and those lines to create some pictures.” We opened our booklets and got to work.

I really liked making those pictures! I can’t remember what I drew, but I do remember that it was more fun than sitting on the reading rug, going over the letters of the alphabet that I knew since I was 3. When we finished our drawings, Ms. Angie took us back to our classroom where our classmates began asking, “Where did you go? Are you in trouble?” We just said that we went to make some pictures for Ms. Angie and that was the end of that. A few days later, though, Ms. Angie came back to get Bryson, Hunter, and me, and took us to a small classroom (now I know that it was an office) where we played with puzzles and read books that no one else in kindergarten was reading. That happened once a week for the rest of the year and for me, it was the day I looked forward to the most every week! I think those special days in Ms. Angie’s office made us three boys even better friends than we were before.

I didn’t know it at the time, but that day that I went with Ms. Angie to draw those pictures was the last proof she needed to say that I was gifted. I didn’t actually get a letter saying I was officially gifted until the end of kindergarten, but my mom was so excited when she opened that letter and read it out loud to me, Daniel, my granddaddy, and my grandma! She told me that I would be in a special class with other really smart and creative kids when I started first grade. I didn’t really care about that, though. I just wanted to know if Bryson and Hunter were going to be in that special class with me! I knew I wouldn’t get to see Hunter that summer because we never got to see friends outside of school, and I’d only get to see Bryson at the baseball fields, so I was anxious to

be back in class with them the next year. At the end of the summer, me and my mom went to the school to meet my first-grade teacher, and when I looked at the list of names taped on the wall outside of my new classroom, I saw Bryson's and Hunter's names on the list! I was so excited!

My mom was right—there were so many smart kids in my first grade class! Not only were Bryson and Hunter in there, so were JB, Aaron, and Simon, all White kids who had been in Ms. Angie's office with me in kindergarten, too. That was the year that I really became competitive, both with myself and with my peers. We were working on memorizing our addition and subtraction facts, and we would do these timed tests to see how many problems you could get right in 1 minute. After you finished all of the problems, you were supposed to turn your paper over so the teacher would know you were done. Well, I was the cocky kid when I finished. I wouldn't slam my paper down like some of the other kids. Instead, I would just quietly turn it over and just sit back and chill. I wanted to be the kid the others would noticed as they looked around, thinking, "Man, Reggie is done! He is so smart!" Sometimes I was the first to turn my paper over and sometimes I wasn't, but I was always going to try to not only be the fastest, but to be the one with all correct answers. Each time we took one of those timed tests, I wanted to be better and faster than I was before, and if I beat the other kids, too, then it was that much sweeter.

Even though I was in a gifted class with all of these smart kids, that didn't stop me from being bad. When I finished my work, I wanted to talk and play with my friends, who may or may not be done with their work. I would get bored so I would start talking and goofing off, until the teacher called my name and told me to get back on-task. That

tactic never worked, by the way. I also did stupid little kid stuff like making farting noises during a test or dancing in the line on the way to lunch. The teacher would send home notes to my mom or would call her at work, telling about how bad I acted, almost every single day of first grade. Finally, I guess the teacher got tired of me and my behavior, so I got moved out of the gifted class and into a regular class. Just like that they took the gifted program away from me. I got a pretty bad whooping from my mom when that happened, too.

For most of first grade, I was in a regular class with a lot of Black kids and a Black teacher named Ms. Crane. She was a big lady, and one look from her was all it took to know that she meant business and wouldn't tolerate me acting like a fool. Right away, it was obvious that the other kids in the class were a step behind me, academically-speaking. Everything Ms. Crane was teaching was so easy to me. I didn't want the other kids to feel bad for not already knowing the stuff she was teaching, so I mostly stayed quiet. When I got moved out of gifted and into Ms. Crane's class, my mom told me, "Reggie, you can't take this moving to a new class as a chance to slack off or a chance to be regular. You definitely need to be the best now, and if you aren't, that's a bad thing. You got to hold yourself to a higher standard, no matter where you at." I definitely took what she said to heart.

You know, I could have been content with being ahead of everybody else, but instead, I was still thinking about those kids in the gifted class. I thought about how much new material they were learning in the gifted class and how that would make them so much smarter than me in second grade. Some days I would think, "Dang, this class is a cakewalk." Other days, I'd tell myself, "I know they're still over there in that gifted class,

learning way more information than I'm learning and having fun while doing it." I understood that I brought this on myself with my bad behavior, but I couldn't help feeling a little bitter. I decided to try to help the kids in my regular class come along with me so we could learn new stuff. I no longer stood out as being the "bad kid" because there were several bad kids in that regular class, so I wanted to stand out in a positive way as the smart kid. Plus, if these kids could learn what I already knew, then there would be someone to compete against once again.

After I moved to Ms. Crane's class, me, Bryson, and Hunter weren't really friends anymore. I mean, if we saw each other in the hall, in the cafeteria, or on the playground, we'd wave or say, "Hey," but that was about it. We weren't buddy-buddy anymore, and that made me sad. I never felt like they were looking down on me since I wasn't in the gifted class anymore, but we were just little kids, and if we weren't in the same class together, we really didn't get a chance to hang out together. I would still see Bryson at the baseball field when our older brothers played, but it didn't seem to be like it was before I got kicked out of gifted. I made new friends once I got to Ms. Crane's class, mostly with Black boys, but those friendships were just different from the ones I was used to. I could definitely play football with my new friends, but that was about the only thing we had in common.

After first grade, I stayed in regular, non-gifted classes for the rest of elementary school. I thought that maybe I would get another chance in the gifted class after first grade, but no such luck. I begged my mom to call the school and talk to the principal, but she wasn't having any of it. "It's your little red wagon, and you gonna pull it," was her response when I'd ask her just to try to get me back in gifted. I don't blame her; I knew

the whole thing was my fault, and I took responsibility for my bad behavior. I guess I just never thought it would affect the rest of my school career. I also had a hard time understanding how my behavior was connected to my giftedness. I mean, it wasn't like I suddenly turned stupid and wasn't a gifted learner any more, yet I was taken out of the gifted program. I still don't really understand it. I guess it just comes down to the fact that I was keeping the other gifted kids from learning, and that just couldn't be tolerated.

Second through fifth grades were less than memorable for me. I mean, I remember getting in trouble regularly for things like talking back, causing classroom disruptions, and things like that, but there just wasn't anything amazing or noteworthy that happened during those years. My teachers, who were all White females and liked me because I could learn quickly, were okay teachers, but they never really challenged me beyond what the rest of the class was doing. Those teachers were not very enthusiastic, either, which made school pretty boring for me. It never seemed like the teachers in my regular classes were motivated to create fun, challenging lessons like my first-grade gifted teacher had. I couldn't really feed my competitive spirit in those regular classes, either. None of the other kids were quite as academically advanced as I was and who wants to compete with someone who's not on their level? It's like when a Division I football team plays a team from some rinky-dink college that's just one step up from a high school team. Those games aren't much fun for the players just like competing with those regular students wasn't much fun for me.

One thing I do clearly remember happened the day that our fifth-grade class went to tour the middle school, specifically the sixth grade halls. We were walking in a line behind our teacher and turned the corner by the guidance counselor's office. The

counselor, an older White lady named Ms. Walden, was standing outside her office and our teacher stopped to speak to her. Ms. Walden looked our line up and down, staring at each student for just a moment before moving her gaze to the next person in line. She stopped when she got to me, walked over to the line and said, “You’re Reggie, aren’t you? I’ve heard about how much trouble you are. You need to know, young man, that we won’t tolerate that kind of behavior here at the middle school. Do you understand?” My classmates who could hear what she was saying started giggling while I just stood there, nodding my head. I was so embarrassed. How did the middle school already know about my behavior? Was I so bad that adults in another school even knew how bad I was? I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes and the heat rising up my neck, but I wasn’t about to let this woman see me cry. Finally, the teacher told us to keep walking, and we continued our tour. I think my face stayed hot until we got back off of the bus at the elementary school. Then and there, I decided to prove Ms. Walden wrong. I would be the most well-behaved student in sixth grade the following year. I wasn’t sure how I was going to do it, but I was determined to try.

The summer between fifth and sixth grades, my mom found out that there was going to be a new program at the middle school where kids could apply to be in advanced and honors classes. I think she heard about it from Bryson’s mom at one of my brother’s summer league baseball games. Bryson was going to apply, and his mom thought that I should apply, too. Of course, my grades from elementary school were pretty much all As, and I earned really high scores on the state standardized tests, so I should have been a shoo-in. About 2 weeks before school started, my mom got a call from the middle school principal who told her that my application was not approved yet because of my long

discipline record from elementary school. Then the principal said, “However, the sixth grade gifted and honors teachers looked at Reggie’s grades and test scores and would like to give him a chance.” He wanted me and my mom to come in for a meeting with him and the teachers, so later that week, we went to the school for the meeting.

To say I was nervous about that meeting is a big understatement! I wanted to be back in gifted classes so badly. Not just so I’d be back in class with Bryson, Hunter, and JB, but so that I would finally be challenged academically. I wanted to be back with kids that I could compete with, not just on the football field, but in the classroom, too. When my mom and I walked into the conference room for the meeting, my heart sank. All five teachers and the principal were White. I thought for sure that I didn’t stand a chance of getting into those gifted classes and that I’d be back with all of the regular kids again, just like elementary school. Mom and I sat down at the table and introduced ourselves. The first teacher to speak was Ms. Miller, the science teacher. She told me how excited she was to have such a smart student in her class and that she couldn’t wait to see how much I would grow in my knowledge of science. She smiled at me the whole time she talked to me, and not one of those fake smiles, either. This was a genuine smile, and I could tell that her words were genuine, too. Next was Ms. Baker, the math teacher, who basically said the same thing. She also told me that she hoped I would join her math club since I made such high scores on my standardized math tests. The other three teachers, Ms. Collins, Ms. Page, and Ms. Hester, said pretty much the same things and no one ever mentioned my behavior record. I just sat there, thinking that maybe I was dreaming. These teachers actually wanted me in their classes? I couldn’t believe it!

Finally, Ms. Miller spoke again. “Now, Reggie,” she said, “there’s a lot of work to do this year, and we really want you to be in our classes, but if you don’t think you’ll be able to behave like you are expected to behave, we won’t be able to keep you with us.” She wasn’t mean about it all; she was just matter-of-fact. I looked at my mom and then said, “Yes, ma’am. I completely understand. I just really want to be back in gifted classes so that I can learn all that I can to prepare me for the future.” All of the teachers smiled at me, and the principal slid a behavior contract across the table for me and my mom to sign. After adding our signatures to the paper and sliding it back to the principal, Ms. Miller said, “Welcome to our team, Reggie!” And, get this, she got out of her chair, came around the table, and hugged me. I felt kind of weird there for a few minutes, but then I just stood up and hugged her back. I couldn’t wait for school to start!

I credit my five sixth grade teachers with really turning my bad self around and helping me become a young gentleman instead of a young thug. None of those ladies were pushovers, and I respected them for that. They kept me under control and wouldn’t let me stand out for negative things. The first week of sixth grade, I walked into my math class like I owned the place, plopped down in my seat, and turned around to talk to Bryson, who was sitting right behind me. Ms. Baker walked by and just tapped on my desk with a pencil. That didn’t faze me; I just kept on talking to Bryson. Of course, Bryson wasn’t responding to me because he didn’t want to get in trouble, but I was wanting to test the waters and see just how far I could push Ms. Baker. While I was turned around, Ms. Baker walked around putting a sheet of math problems on each desk. When she put a sheet on my desk, I turned around and looked at it. Those problems were so easy, I could have done them in my sleep. I worked them all out and when Ms. Baker

noticed I was finished, she came over to my desk, knelt down next to me and whispered, “I need you to be the example for the rest of these students. You got all of these problems correct, so I know you’re a good math role model. But I also need you to be a good citizen role model. Think you can do that?” She never got mad or raised her voice, and she kept a smile on her face the whole time she whispered. I knew then and there that I wanted to make Ms. Baker and the rest of the teachers proud of me, not just with my grades, but with my behavior, too.

Ms. Baker, Ms. Miller, Ms. Collins, Ms. Page, and Ms. Hester were not only amazing teachers, but they were also amazing human beings. They each made learning fun in their own ways based on the subject they taught. They knew all of our strengths and weaknesses, and individualized their teaching based on what the students needed. We actually participated in class discussions that didn’t get out of hand because the students couldn’t handle it. We were always working together in small groups, something that didn’t happen often when I was in those regular classes. Now, I’m not saying we were all angels all the time, but when someone did mess up, we knew that the teachers were going to be consistent and fair. They didn’t pick favorites, at least as far as we could tell, and they truly loved each and every one of us. That was probably the best school year ever, even though it was far from perfect.

Once I got back into the gifted program and was taking honors classes, my old (*non-gifted*) classmates from elementary school weren’t really a part of my school life anymore. They weren’t in my academic classes with me, and just a few of them were in weightlifting or PE with me. Pretty much all of my old close friends, like Bryson and Hunter, were in my academic classes, and I made several new friends in those classes, as

well. We sat together at lunch, we played together at recess, and we were pretty much around each other most of the school day, so yeah, we were all pretty close. After about the first month of school, some of my friends, both Black and White, from my elementary classes started ribbing me about being in the “smart classes” when they would see me in the cafeteria or in the hallway. They would say things like I wasn’t cool anymore since I was in the smart classes or I was lame because I was tucking my shirt in and following the rules. I was also getting some peer pressure from the neighborhood kids, all of whom were Black, to start breaking the rules at home and at school. They dared me to do things like pull the chair out from under one of the nerdiest kids in my science class, or to write a nasty message about a teacher on the bathroom wall. I wouldn’t give in to them, though, mainly because I didn’t want to disappoint my teachers, especially Ms. Baker. I felt like it would break my heart if I broke hers by being that badass kid I was when I was younger, and I just couldn’t stand the thought of that.

That year, I made an intentional choice of what to wear. On school days, when I would mostly be around White, preppy kids, I would dress in collared shirts, khaki shorts or pants, and Sperry boat shoes. I knew that I was smart, but I wanted to look the part of a smart, gifted kid. If that meant dressing White, so be it. On the weekends, though, when I’d be hanging out with my brother and the boys from the neighborhood (which was probably 90% Black), I would dress Black: white t-shirt, sagging jeans, and a pair of Jordans. I’d normally dress that way (*Black*) on the football bus, too, if we weren’t required to wear our uniforms. Dressing like the other Black kids was much more comfortable than wearing those stiff khaki shorts and Polo shirts, so when I wanted to just be chill, I dressed the part of a young Black male. A few of my football teammates

were also in my classes, and whenever they would see me dressed, well, dressed like a thug, they would give me the strangest looks. But then everything would be normal with my White classmates when I'd show up in class, dressed sharp and preppy, just like them.

At the end of sixth grade, I received so many awards! Not only did I get awards for football and track, but I also got awards for my academics. I made all As and Bs that year, so I got a special certificate for that. And, get this, I got a citizenship award! Me! The badass kid whose reputation preceded him actually got an award for good behavior! I think that's the award I was the proudest of. Sixth grade was the first year since kindergarten that I did not get a discipline referral or get sent to the principal's office. I know I owe it to my teachers, especially Ms. Baker. They poured so much respect and love into me, and they actually believed in me, so I never wanted to let them down by getting in trouble or making bad grades. Not a day goes by that I don't think of them and say a little "Thank you" to God for putting them in my life right when I needed them.

Now during sixth grade, our teachers would always tell us how tough the teachers in seventh grade would be. The seventh-grade teachers would start getting us ready for high school, and they were a group of no-nonsense teachers, according to Ms. Baker and Ms. Miller. The night before the first day of seventh grade, I was a little nervous. I got all my clothes out for the next day . . . a collared shirt and khaki shorts, of course. The next morning, I got dressed, combed my hair, and even put on some of my Axe cologne. There is no smell that screams "middle school boy" like Axe cologne! Anyway, I walked to the bus stop where Devin and Isaac, two kids from the neighborhood, were already waiting. Devin was in eighth grade and Isaac was already in high school. They weren't really my friends; they were just kids from the neighborhood that I knew and played football with

from time to time. As soon as they saw me, they started laughing and pointing. I knew they were laughing at the way I was dressed. They were both in oversized hoodies (even though it was like 90 degrees) and baggy pants—definitely the opposite of how I was dressed. I stood there, wishing my brother would hurry up and get to the bus stop so maybe those two thugs would stop messing with me. I tried to ignore them, but their jokes about me dressing like a Ritchie Rich to impress my White friends were starting to get under my skin. Finally, Daniel showed up, causing Devin and Isaac to stop laughing at me. They didn't say another word as we climbed up the bus steps and sat down in our seats.

The first few weeks of seventh grade went fine. I had friends in all of my classes, I was playing on the football team, and I had a girlfriend. Devin and Isaac weren't bothering me at the bus stop anymore, and I was even named the character education kid for August. There was a lot of homework, but the teachers were okay, even if they were not nearly as caring and enthusiastic as the sixth grade teachers had been, and the work wasn't really that hard. Maybe that was just because it was the beginning of the year. Maybe the work was going to get more challenging as the year progressed. Maybe I was going to get to shine in the classroom like I was shining on the football field. Maybe all of those things would have happened. But I never got the chance to find out.

Let me set the scene a little bit here. All football players, both middle school and high school, must take at least 1 period of weightlifting each quarter. At the middle school, we were to go to the locker room, put on our gym clothes, and meet the coach in the weight room—and we were to do this in a hurry. We only had like 45 minutes total to dress out, work out, and get dressed for our next class. There was never really any adult

supervision in the locker room, even though it was full of teenage boys who were immature and, to be honest, stupid. Every day, the football players would stream into the locker room and start popping each other and talking smack about each other until we heard the coach's whistle coming from the weight room. There was never any harm done, all the putdowns were just jokes, but after I got the award for character education, the atmosphere in the locker room suddenly didn't feel so playful.

It started out with little comments here and there from some of my teammates. Comments like, "Hey, look at Reggie, Mr. Character Kid!" or "Man, he must really suck up to those White teachers!" They'd laugh, and I'd smile back because that's what I did. Plus, I thought those kinds of comments would taper off once they found someone else to pick on. Well, they didn't taper off; in fact, they got worse. One day while we were dressing out, Jhamez walked by and said, "Hey, Reg, I think your skin is a little lighter today than it was yesterday!" The guys around us started laughing, and Quent said, "That's what happens when you start hanging around all those White kids!" That caused even more laughter from the crowd. Then, Coach blew the whistle, and we all filed out on the way to the weight room. I knew I should have said something to Coach, but we (*Black boys*) just don't tell on each other. One thing my brother always told me was, "Nothing good ever happens to a snitch." So, I kept quiet, went over to the weight bench, and took my anger out on my body.

After about 2 weeks of listening to comments about how White I was turning and how nerdy I was becoming, I had almost reached my limit. I knew if I got in trouble for fighting these guys, I'd get kicked off the football team. Worse, I'd disappoint my teachers and prove that stupid guidance counselor Ms. Walden right. I decided that I was

going to talk to the coach about the stuff that was being said in the locker room, but I was going to wait until Friday so it wouldn't affect our Thursday night game. Thursday came, and we were all pumped up because we were playing our crosstown rival that afternoon. Maybe there was just too much adrenaline and testosterone flowing that day, I don't know. I was just sitting on a bench, lacing up my Jordans, when I heard Quent say, "Wonder when he's going to ditch Jazmine for a White girl. Maybe then I'll ask her out." A chorus of "Oooohs" rose up from the rest of the players, and I could feel the heat rising in my neck. Jhamez decided it was his turn. "Yeah, I remember when Reg just acted White. Now he IS White! Let's see how weak he is in our game today! You know White kids aren't good at football!" The heat was now all over my face, so hot I was sure the kid next to me could feel it radiating off my skin. I still kept my head down, looking at my shoes as I untied and retied the laces, and said, "That's enough, man. You don't want to go there." Apparently, he did. "Aw, man!" Jhamez started. "Don't get all pissed because we're hurting your feelings. Wait . . . maybe you gone cry like a little White boy and go tell your smarty-pants teachers that those mean old Black boys are hurting your little feelings."

I don't remember standing up. I don't remember punching Jhamez in the stomach. I don't remember him bending over. I don't remember punching him in the side of the head. I don't remember him falling to the floor. I don't remember kicking him all over. I don't remember the other players screaming, laughing, calling for Coach. I don't remember Coach coming in from the weight room, yelling at me to stop. I don't remember him pulling me off of Jhamez and tossing me to the other side of the room. I don't remember any of that . . . but I know it happened because I saw the video. I never

found out who did it, but one of the other players took out his phone and started videoing as soon as Jhamez said I was going to cry like a White boy. After I was taken to the principal's office and given a wet washcloth for my face, I finally started seeing things again. I saw the principal on the phone, heard him talking to my mom. I saw the coach sitting in the chair next to me, holding a cell phone. I saw the school resource officer standing in the doorway, shaking her head. I didn't know why I was there, why Coach was there, why the officer was there, until Coach put the phone in my face and showed me the fight. Well, I don't know if it was a fight if I was the only one punching and kicking. That video was the most brutal thing I had ever seen . . . and it was me committing that brutality. I started to cry and whisper, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." But I knew that sorry wasn't going to be good enough this time.

Needless to say, I was sent home for the next week and was immediately kicked off the football team. The worst punishment, though, was getting removed from the gifted program yet again and having to move to non-gifted classes. I couldn't believe it. All I was trying to do was stand up for myself, to make those jerks stop messing with me about not being Black enough, and I was the one who got in trouble. And what about Coach, who left stupid teenage boys in a locker room unsupervised? I knew it wasn't any of my business, but I wanted him to be punished, too, along with Jhamez, who was bullying me. I was losing so much, and I wanted those two to lose something, too. Because of my behavior, they [principal and assistant principal] took my education away from me. I still don't see how that was fair.

I spent the week after the fight doing chores, working in the yard, and reading books. I missed football practice, but I didn't really miss any of my former teammates.

What I really missed was going to class with other smart kids and being taught by teachers who actually wanted to teach. At the end of the week, my mom got a phone call from the principal who told her the names of my new teachers. I still couldn't believe that my behavior got me kicked out of the gifted program again, but I decided to face reality, buck up, and just work hard for the rest of the year. Well, I didn't really need to work hard in those classes, but I was going to make sure that I got everything done that needed to be done while keeping my head down and staying out of trouble.

I made it through the school year, finishing with straight A's that I really didn't have to work hard for. My parents told me that since I wouldn't be going to football camp that summer that I was going to have to get a job. There aren't many jobs out there for a middle school kid, so I ended up mowing yards and washing cars all summer. I didn't necessarily hate the work, but I knew that it wasn't something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Deep down, I knew I needed to get my act together if I wanted to go to college and make something out of myself, and that summer of hard work cemented that for me. Although I still didn't feel like I should have gotten such a tough punishment since I was just defending myself, I understood the need to be on my best behavior in eighth grade.

Summer was winding down, and I had pretty much come to terms with being in regular-level classes for my last year in middle school. I was just going to make the best of it and then try again when I started high school. The week before school started, I was in my room playing video games when my mom came in and sat down on the bed. At first, I thought, "Great. What have I done now?" but then realized that I had been good as gold that summer, so my anxiety lessened just a bit. "Reg," my mom began, "how would you feel about going to a new school for eighth grade?" I paused my game and turned

around to look at her. “What do you mean? There’s only one middle school, Mom,” I said. She sighed and continued. “I’m talking about you going to the Honors program at the city’s middle school.” I didn’t say anything, just looked at her. I had been a Hornet since I was 5. How was I supposed to suddenly become a Mustang? Where did this idea come from? Why was she even considering moving me to another school system?

Earlier that summer, Mom started worrying about me being in those regular classes and possibly being around my former teammates who caused all this trouble in the first place. Unbeknownst to me, she called Ms. Baker, my sixth-grade math teacher, and asked her, “If Reggie was your son, what would you do for him for eighth grade?” Mom told me that Ms. Baker paused for a minute (Mom even thought the call had been disconnected) and then said, “I’m saying this as an advocate for Reggie, not as an employee of the school system, okay?” Mom agreed, and Ms. Baker continued, “If Reggie was my son, I’d move him to the Honors program at the other school system. He’s going to get what he needs academically there, and he should be able to play football again. If he stays in our system, he won’t be able to use his gifts.” They talked for a few more minutes and then hung up. Mom said that she was conflicted about what to do, but once she talked to my dad that night, she made the decision to move me to the other school system here in town. It would take time to get used to wearing new team colors and seeing a different mascot on the field.

To be honest, I didn’t know what to expect, starting at a new school in a new school system. Even though I was still going to school in the same town, it would be with totally new kids. And how was I going to play football on a team with guys I used to face down on the football field? Would I still be one of the smartest kids in my classes? I was

worried that my new teachers knew about my previous behavior, especially about the locker room fight, and would automatically dislike me, forming negative opinions about me before even meeting me. Ms. Baker advocated for me at my old school, but what about at my new school? All of these questions and worries swirled around in my head for weeks before the start of the new school year. I don't think I slept very much the night before my first day of eighth grade!

There are two words I would use to describe my first day of middle school at Sunset Heights Academy: culture shock. Everyone there, from the students to the teachers, was seriously focused on learning. And not on just any learning; this was high-level learning that was going on in that school. As I walked down the main hall to the director's office, I noticed how nicely dressed all of the kids were, making me glad I chose my polo shirt and khakis that day, and how no one, not even the teachers, was yelling or screaming. I went into the main office and told the secretary that I was supposed to see the director, Dr. Gainous, that morning since I was new to the school. The secretary smiled at me and said she'd let Dr. Gainous know that I was there. I sat down in the chair next to the secretary's desk, and within just a couple of minutes, Dr. Gainous, this older White lady with a huge smile, came out of her office, told me to call her Doc, and asked me to walk with her to my first class of the day, gifted math. As we walked, Dr. Gainous asked if I had any questions or concerns about starting the new school. I shook my head and she smiled. "Well," she said, "if you think of anything, come by my office anytime." We stopped at the door to my math class, and she squeezed my shoulder, saying, "You are going to be just fine here, Reggie." I sure hoped she was right.

I never should have doubted Doc. After the first few days, I knew I would be more than fine at Sunset Heights. My classmates, who were mainly White and Asian with a couple of Black girls included, were so nice to me. I was nervous that I would face some racism since I was the only Black boy in the grade, but everyone was so welcoming. The school was pretty small; there were only about 60 of us in the entire grade. At my previous school, there were almost 425 kids in each grade! All of the teachers, especially Doc, who became my high school math teacher, and Mrs. Stegall, my English teacher, really took the time to get to know the students and made us all feel like one big happy family. Doc and Mrs. Stegall would give you the shirts off their backs if you needed it. Don't get me wrong; the classes were no cakewalk! All of the teachers held us to high expectations and were really passionate about their subjects, and I definitely learned how to read, write, and do math at a deeper level. I worked hard to get all As and Bs, but I didn't mind working hard for my teachers because I respected them, and I knew they respected me.

Since I was new to the school, I missed football tryouts from the previous spring. But the first week of school, during my gym class, I ran the 40-yard dash in 4.6 seconds, and the coach asked me, "Do you run track?" Once I caught my breath, I said, "No, but I do play football." He looked at me and said, "I think we need to put you on the team. What position do you play?" I smiled and said, "I can play any position on defense, but my favorite is linebacker." Coach told me that he was going to talk to the junior varsity coach at the high school and see what he could do to get me on the team. By the middle of the second week of school, I was on the junior varsity team, practicing with high school kids. It felt so good to be back in pads, tackling guys and talking trash with them.

There was only one other kid from the Academy on the team, and he was a freshman. All of the other players came from the “regular” high school and weren’t really in higher level classes like those of us in the Academy. I knew a lot of the players from Pop Warner and Y football when we was kids, so I wasn’t totally a new kid on the block. I was the only eighth grader out there, but those guys treated me like I had always been a Mustang. It was a weird feeling at first, like I was almost out of place, but once I started playing, that feeling went away.

Eighth grade was such a good year for me, and it was definitely what I needed to get my spirits up after everything that happened at my old school. I was back in football, and our JV team went undefeated that year. I even got credited for a sack during the last game of the season. My parents went to every game, and my brother would come see me play if he wasn’t working. Even Ms. Baker, my math teacher from sixth grade that told my mom I should go to the Academy, came to see me play a few times. I was doing good in all of my classes, earning As and Bs, even though those good grades were hard to get. The teachers at the Academy, man, were they tough! But even though they challenged us [the students] to think critically and to analyze everything, they cared about you and would support you if they saw you was struggling in class. I was also staying out of trouble, basically because there was no one at the Academy that would tolerate me acting a fool. Plus, I didn’t want to disappoint my teachers, so I just focused on learning and playing football, not clowning around or getting into trouble.

During high school, I had two sets of friends: academic friends and football friends. My academic friends were the ones I was in class with and almost all of them were White. I never really hung out with any of my academic friends because all we

really had in common was school. Most of us wanted to be challenged and learn as much as we could. There was some knuckleheads that didn't really care about learning, and you could tell they was only at the Academy because their parents wanted them there. It was like a prestige thing, going to the Academy, and you could tell which kids' parents made a big deal out of the Academy name. Those kids didn't really care about their grades, and they would get put on probation from time to time. I don't know if there was really anything to that probation, cause no one ever got kicked out, but I guess it was a scare tactic for them. When I was around my academic friends, I would make sure to use proper English and not use any slang terms that might make me sound dumber than them. That made my school days a bit exhausting, but to me, it was worth making the effort to blend in with the other students.

My football friends was just that. We were friends at football practice, during weightlifting class, on the football field, and sometimes on the weekends. A lot of us [football players] played together on community teams, so we were together a lot. Pretty much all of us was Black, so I was able to be more like myself around these guys. They all sounded like thugs, using incorrect English almost all of the time, and I could easily relax around them and talk like they did. We cut up a lot when we was around each other, ribbing each other about stupid teenage boy stuff. More than once the coach made us run suicides because we was wasting practice time being stupid. If those football guys were in my classes at the Academy, I definitely would have been getting in trouble for being off-task and cutting up. The thing is, though, a lot of those guys on the football team was really smart, and there was a few guys that really should have been at the Academy with me. Like Bernard, for instance. He made really good grades and even earned an academic

letter to put on his football letterman jacket. He was a math whiz, and I got him to help me with my geometry homework a few times during sophomore year. One day at practice, I think it was junior year, I asked Bernard why he wasn't at the Academy and he said that a [White] teacher in middle school told his mom that she didn't think Bernard would be a good fit for the Academy. So, he didn't even fill out the application to try to get in. I couldn't believe it! Bernard was smarter and had a better work ethic than some of those kids at the Academy; he definitely deserved to be there. I told him that and he just shrugged and said, "It's too late now." Last I heard, he was finishing up his degree in sports management at some college in Virginia. I wish we'd stayed in touch, but I guess once you graduate from high school and go in different directions, keeping up a friendship gets really hard.

My senior year was amazing, both on and off the field. I earned All-Region and All-Area honors for my record-breaking number of tackles, both combined and solo. I was benching about 250 at that time, and it showed out on the field. I could take down anyone on the offense, especially the quarterback. I was still getting As and a few Bs here and there in my classes, both AP and honors. I found out early during football season that I was going to receive a football scholarship to a Division 1 FCS [Football Championship Subdivision] school in North Carolina and I was over the moon excited. I had a gorgeous girlfriend who was already a freshman in college, and she celebrated my football and academic achievements with me and my family. She was there at my graduation party that my parents threw for me. Ms. Baker from middle school was there, too. Man, that really meant a lot, having a teacher from so long ago coming to a party celebrating my academic and athletic success. I still credit her for my academic success because if it

wasn't for her telling my mom I should go to the Academy, I would have stayed in those non-gifted classes and who knows where I would have ended up. She and I still keep in touch today, and she is still my cheerleader, even though I'm in college and not a sixth grader in her class.

It has always been my nature to be competitive. I'm just a competitive person, in both academics and in sports. Starting in second grade, I felt like, "I'm the strongest, fastest little boy out here. Can't no one beat me in a race or in a football game!" And honestly, no one could beat me. I excelled in football, basketball, running. You name the sport, and I was better in it than most kids my age. But as far as academics, I was way more competitive because I knew that I was never the smartest kid. I wasn't the most gifted, academically. There was a lot of other kids that were smarter than me, like Bryson, Hunter, and JB, so I felt like there was more to prove in academics, like, "I know I can go out there and beat these guys in a race, but I need to prove that I can beat them at academics, too." I knew that I wasn't the smartest, but that didn't keep me from trying to be. I just needed to work a little harder to get my academics up to the level of my athletics. I'm really trying to be more mature in the area of competitiveness, trying to just compete with myself to make me better instead of against other people to be better than them. It's a day-by-day process, that's for sure!

As much as I love football, academics and learning has always been first with me. My parents never got on me about my grades because they knew I'd be tougher on myself than they could ever be. They knew I was focused; I was just as focused and just as in touch with academics as I was with football. I love learning stuff even more than I love tacking guys on the football field. It's kind of weird that good grades would just

come to me, even if I didn't study as much as I should have. I always understood that football could only get me so far and that my education was what would make me a successful man that everyone could be proud of. I always knew that I was one torn up knee or bad shoulder injury away from never playing football again, and it would have been stupid to put all my money on football being my future. A lot of guys from my high school football team did just that, didn't work hard in the classroom, and now they are washed-up athletes without a strong education to fall back on. I never wanted that to be me, and I don't want that for guys who are playing high school football today. That's why I go back to my hometown every once in a while to talk to the football players at my old school. I tell them my whole story, the bad behavior, getting kicked out of gifted classes twice, all of it. Hopefully some of those kids will learn from my mistakes and not make them themselves.

Even though I took the gifted education program for granted when I was younger, getting kicked out of those classes in elementary school and middle school, I understand what an impact those classes I took made on my life. Without those classes, especially the ones at the Academy, I wouldn't be working on my psychology degree now. I might be working some minimum-wage job where I would be miserable. Or even worse, I might have some kind of criminal record like a couple of the guys I played football with. That's what society expects out of Black athletes, isn't it? That we end up in jail, unemployed, owing child support to who knows how many women. I never wanted to be that guy, my parents and teachers never wanted me to be that guy, and I know that if football was my main focus instead of academics, that's exactly how I would have ended up.

I can't wait to see what the future holds for me. One thing I know for sure is that I want to be that positive Black role model that so many little Black boys need. I want to show them that learning and academics are important, and that even if they are good at sports, they need an education to fall back on. I was blessed with parents that instilled the importance of a good education in me, and I definitely want to pass that on to the next generation of Black kids. Even though I didn't fit the mold of a traditional [White] gifted student, I was able to be successful in those types of classes and wasn't afraid to try challenging things, even if it meant I would fail once or twice. Today, it seems like there are so many Black boys without a positive father figure in their lives, and I believe that's what leads kids down the wrong road. With my psychology degree, I'll be in a place where I can help those kids recognize the importance of being an educated citizen. Maybe I'll become a school counselor, or maybe I'll be a pediatric psychologist, but either way, I know I can make a difference in the lives of little Reggie everywhere.

Reflection

At the end of what would become our final interview, Reggie told me, "It just kind of hit me—it's making me think a lot right now. I feel like in life, everything is ordained. Everything happens for a reason, even that horrible fight I got into in middle school. If that hadn't happened, I wouldn't have gone to the Academy, and I probably wouldn't have gotten such a strong education." When I asked him if he was still angry about being removed from the gifted program once again, he sighed and said, "Not anymore. It really was the wake-up call I needed to get my ass in shape." Reggie then gave me a sly smile and, on the edge of laughing, said, "I guess it was time for me to stop being bad as hell!"

Two months after our final interview, Reggie's role model and upstander, Dr. Gainous, passed away after a very brief battle with cancer. Knowing how close Reggie was to his mentor, I reached out to him to offer my condolences. His response to me was brief with no mention of our unfinished interview series. Reggie wrote, "I can't believe she is gone. I thought she would live forever. What I'm most sad about is that other bad little Black kids like me won't get to have her in their corner."

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I used first-person portraits to share my participants' lived experiences of participating in a gifted education program during their K-12 educational career. While there were some similarities between participants' stories, such as strong relationships with others, a desire for challenge and achievement, and a love of learning, there were also differences in the participants' experiences. Two participants, Felicia and Reggie, were at some point removed from gifted education programming due to behavior issues, but the remaining four participants were not. Most of the participants relived the moments when they found out they were officially gifted, yet Donovan did not realize he had been labeled as gifted until he received the recruitment flyer for this study. Each of the six participants had his or her own personal take on the gifted education experience, but each kept his or her own voice when sharing that experience with me.

In the next chapter, I detailed the four themes I created after analyzing and coding each participants' series of interview transcripts. The four themes I created were based on the overarching connections I saw within and between my participants' portraits, as well as on the existing research and theory related to my topic. The integration of research,

methodology, and participant interviews will be evident in my description of my four central themes.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION OF THEMES

In this study, I intended to explore the experiences of recently-graduated gifted Black students during their time in a gifted education program. I wanted to learn about the experiences that my participants considered to be life changing and life affirming. To accomplish my goal, I interviewed six gifted Black high school graduates who participated in a rural gifted education program at some time during their K-12 educational careers. I explained my methodology in Chapter 3, and I shared profiles written in the words of the participants in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the themes I created after reading and analyzing participants' interview data, as well as my own personal researcher memos. According to Packer (2011), a *theme* is the product of the researcher's interpretation of the analyzed data. I narrowed my topics down to four overarching themes: (a) *relationships are important to the participants' social and academic lives*; (b) *participants share the characteristics of a strong racial identity*; (c) *participants have a love of learning and of academic challenge*, and; (d) *participants have a strong need for achievement*. Each theme contained three subcategories, which are shown in Figure 4.

Theme 1

My first theme is: *Relationships are important to the participants' social and academic lives*. As I reread my participants' portraits, I noticed that relationships with family, with teachers or other adults, and with peers were a constant in each participant's

story. The participants had someone in their lives that they wanted to make proud and never disappoint. Wayne discussed his “tight-knit family,” focusing specifically on his relationship with his twin sister Beatrice. His face lit up with pride when he talked about Bea walking across the graduation stage and receiving her diploma. Wayne also credited

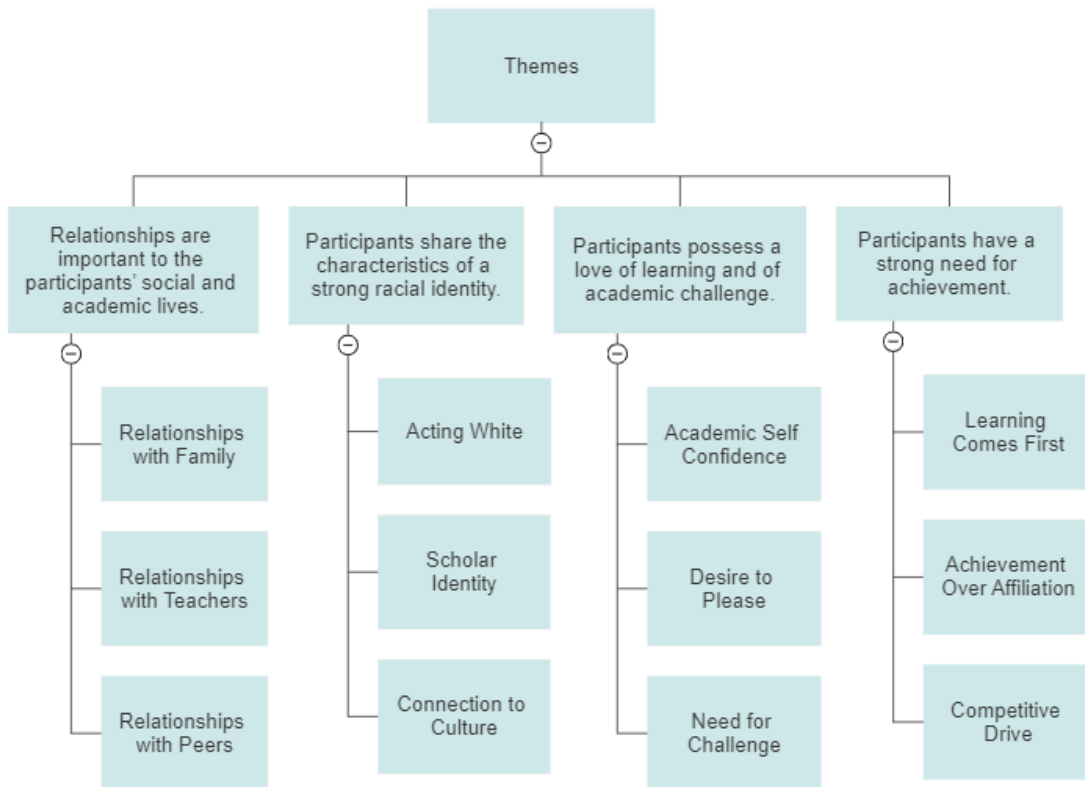


Figure 4: *Themes and Subcategories Organizational Chart*

his grandfather with stepping in to become a father figure in his life once his biological dad was mostly out of the picture. Letitia described growing up in a nurturing home with parents who supported and loved their children unconditionally. Like Wayne, Emmanuel also talked about his relationships with his mom and grandparents, focusing on their support of his academic and athletic successes. Felicia considered her mom her best friend, stating “We have had such a strong relationship since I was very young.” Referring to her mom as her inspiration, Felicia credits her mother with instilling in her a

love of learning. Donovan appreciated his parents' support of his curious nature, even in the times when his curiosity got the best of him. Reggie stated that he was "blessed to come from such a loving, tight-knit family," describing his parents as his role models and his father as the epitome of the man he hopes to become.

Teachers and other important adults also played a role in the participants' lives. Wayne described how supportive his fifth-grade social studies teacher was after Wayne earned an F for the first time ever, telling Wayne that one F would not define him. When Letitia's preschool teacher allowed Letitia to read higher-level books than a typical preschooler would read, it gave her a sense of accomplishment. Emmanuel fondly remembered his sixth-grade math teacher Mrs. Foy, who talked him down from a potentially explosive situation and celebrated with him when he received the highest standardized math scores in the entire grade level. A third-grade teacher acted like a school mom to Felicia, inviting Felicia to her house for ice cream sundaes and board games. In seventh grade, Felicia met Dr. Michaels, an English teacher who took the time to get to know Felicia and is still in touch with her today. Donovan described his sixth-grade teachers as being "energetic and their classes never boring," which made that year his best year in middle school. Reggie credited his five sixth grade teachers with "turning his bad self around," specifically his math teacher Ms. Baker, whom he called his cheerleader.

When it came to talking about relationships with peers, participants described both positive and negative experiences. Wayne shared stories about his best friend Jackson, who was White and was always ready to make people laugh. In middle school, Wayne's friend group grew to include more gifted and high-achieving peers who were

mostly White. While Letitia talked about having “a lot of friends, both Black and White” in elementary school, she ruminated on how that changed once she entered middle school and started taking gifted classes. She stated, “I would see my Black friends who weren’t in gifted classes building relationships and making connections with each other, but I couldn’t do that because I spent all day in gifted classes with only White people.”

Emmanuel’s smile grew as he remembered his best friend Jason, who was recently killed in a motorcycle accident. Referring to him as “my brother,” Emmanuel laughed when talking about their shared love of laughing and playing around in class, staying just outside of trouble. When Emmanuel talked about his Black “football friends,” he didn’t smile as much, sharing that he got in more serious trouble with those guys than he did with his gifted friends. Felicia described how happy she was in seventh grade, when her friend group grew to include peers of different races and ability levels. Once she started cheerleading again in high school, she became friends with three other cheerleaders with whom she is still friends today. Calling themselves the “Four Musketeers,” the girls could often be found at each other’s houses on the weekends. Felicia appreciated the support her friends gave her when it came to putting academics first. Even though Donovan had a core group of friends with whom he shared “nerd characteristics,” he mentioned that they would often refer to him as their “token Black friend.” Donovan told me, “I guess I’m just so used to being referred to as the token Black friend that I’ve just grown numb to it.” And while those were his words, the expression on his face told a different story.

While creating this first theme, I noticed that much of what my participants experienced with supportive relationships reiterated the findings I read about during my literature review. Ford et al. (2008) used data from their descriptive study of 166 gifted

Black middle and high school students to show those students' need for support and encouragement from both home and school in order to persevere and successfully participate in a gifted program. In her study of 200 classroom teachers, Samuels (2018) found that strong teacher-student relationships led to a positive and trusting classroom environment where students were engaged in the learning and successful in the program. Regarding relationships with peers, Cross, Bugaj, and Mammadov (2016) suggested that "A peer group that values academic achievement will motivate adolescents to engage academically" (p. 25), supporting my participants' descriptions of peers who valued and supported their commitment to academics.

Thinking back on my experience as a gifted classroom teacher, I cannot recall any of my Black students having anything less than strong family support. There was one gifted Black student, Trayvion (pseudonym), who started the year off in my 7th grade gifted language arts class, but when he earned a failing grade for the quarter, he was removed from my class and placed in a regular, non-gifted language arts class. I remember trying to get in touch with his mother every day for at least 2 weeks before I finally was able to reach her by phone. When I explained Trayvion's misbehavior, missing homework, and failing test grades, his mom told me that she "didn't know what to do with him, either," so I could just keep my complaints to myself. I was dumbfounded by this mother's response. How could she be so lackadaisical about her own son? I tried to work with Trayvion for the rest of the quarter, but he refused to complete any work since he thought he would fail the class anyway. Maybe I could have worked harder with Trayvion, but without support from his family, I do not know how successful I would have been.

Theme 2

My second theme is: *Participants share the characteristics of a strong racial identity*. According to Jones (1997), racial identity is connected to “race-related adaptations to the sociopolitical and cultural constructs of race” (p. 292), and Ford and Harris (1997) found that a strong racial identity has a significant impact on academic achievement and attitudes for Black students. My participants each described experiences with three aspects of a strong racial identity: the acting White accusation, a scholar identity, and a connection to Black culture. Wayne recalled his older brother Shawn accusing him of acting White, telling Wayne, “It seems like you been changing since you been in those gifted classes. A lot of your friends are different, too.” When Wayne asked Shawn to elaborate, Shawn “started naming a laundry list of behaviors,” such as the way Wayne dressed and the way he talked. Instead of feeling embarrassed, Wayne was more concerned that he had disappointed his big brother. Letitia’s first encounter with the acting White accusation was in first grade, when a White classmate told Letitia to “stop trying to talk so White” when she corrected the classmate. Strong-willed Letitia took that as an opportunity to get up on the table and let her classmates know that she could be both educated and Black. When his Black football friends told Emmanuel that he was acting White, Emmanuel let his friend’s comments roll off his back. Reggie grew emotional when he recounted the day he could no longer handle his friend’s accusations of acting White. He told me, “After 2 weeks of listening to comments about how White I was turning and how nerdy I was becoming, I had almost reached my limit,” and once he did, his anger overtook him, leading to a fight that was the “most brutal thing” he had ever seen.

The study's participants also demonstrated characteristics of a strong scholar identity. Wayne shared that he always considered himself a strong student who was focused on the future, stating that he "wanted to stand out as a Black student who was up for the challenge AP [classes] would bring." Because she had been reading from a very young age, Letitia thought that she was ready to skip ahead to first grade before she even started preschool. In sixth grade, when placed in his first gifted math class, Emmanuel "went to class everyday ready to learn something new" because he understood that he was already a strong math student. Felicia, who also considered herself a strong math student, talked about being the first student in her fourth grade class to answer math problems her teacher wrote on the board. "I just seemed to enjoy math more than my classmates did," she stated, "and I was certainly better at math than most of them." Donovan recalled that school seemed to come naturally to him, always being one of the top students in his class each year. He was quite disappointed when, in ninth grade, he was placed in a regular English class instead of an honors class. Donovan quickly grew bored with the class, certain that he should be doing more rigorous classwork.

Although the participants were part of a very White school environment, they each managed to maintain a connection to their Black culture. Wayne credited his family, especially his grandfather, with keeping him culturally grounded. He recalled talking with his grandfather about the struggles the older man endured while growing up, and Wayne was determined not to forget everything his grandfather went through, simply because he was a Black man. In middle school, Letitia felt like she was "losing [her] connection to the Black community" when she watched her Black non-gifted friends building relationships without her. But once she became friends with other Black students

in the high school band, Letitia began to feel reconnected to her Black roots, making her feel more like her true self. Donovan, who appeared indifferent to the idea that he was always “seen at the Black friend in the group,” shared that he felt secure enough in his identity as a Black male to let racially-centered jabs by his friends just slide off his back. However, when he emailed me 3 weeks after our last interview to tell me about his friends calling him an Oreo, I got the sense that comments about race affected Donovan more than he wanted to admit.

The second theme I created actually contradicted the existing research on the concept of acting White. All six of the study’s participants had at least one experience of being accused of acting White, supporting studies conducted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Grantham and Biddle (2014), and Whiting (2009). However, unlike the findings by these researchers, my participants’ experiences, except for Reggie’s, did not prevent them from being academically successful in the gifted program. Wayne, Letitia, Emmanuel, Felicia, and Donovan may have each reacted differently to this accusation, but none of them let it affect their academic success. Reggie’s tolerance for the acting White accusation built up over the course of 2 weeks, and resulted in his getting in a fight and being removed from the gifted program. Prior to this removal, he was earning As and Bs in all of his gifted classes, so I cannot say with certainty that his academic success would have suffered if he had not been taken out of those classes.

Whiting (2009) and Ford (2012) both discussed the relationship between a gifted Black student’s strong scholar identity and his or her academic success. Each of the study’s participants described himself or herself in ways that aligned with the various characteristics of a strong scholar identity. Wayne considered himself a strong student,

demonstrating the self-awareness characteristic, as did Letitia when she talked about wanting to skip kindergarten because she already knew how to read. Felicia, who considered herself a stronger math student than her classmates, clearly possessed academic self-confidence, another characteristic of a strong scholar identity. These examples were just a few of the ways my participants supported the idea that a strong scholar identity led them to academic success.

Each of the study's participants also shared experiences that demonstrated a connection to Black culture, supporting Bergin and Cooks' (2002) study, which showed very few academically-successful Black and Hispanic students felt a disconnect from their racial identity when pursuing high academic achievement. Harris and Marsh (2010) confirmed Bergin and Cooks' findings when they suggested that Black students who possessed a strong connection to their Black culture performed better academically than their peers who felt disconnected from that culture. Wayne credited his grandfather with keeping him "culturally grounded," while Letitia restored her connection to her Black culture due in part to her Black bandmates. Donovan, who said he had come to terms with being the token Black member of his friend group, claimed he felt secure in his Black male identity and could take the jokes his friends made about his being an Oreo.

Theme 3

My third theme is: *Participants possess a love of learning and of academic challenge*. The participants detailed, to some extent, their academic self-confidence, the desire to please others, and the need to be challenged. Each participant described experiences that demonstrated a positive academic self-confidence, which Adams, Robinson, and Lewis (2020) described as a scholar's ability to "maintain confidence in

their academic capabilities, not [feel] despondent toward educational challenges, and have strong work ethics” (p. 9). Wayne shared that in fifth grade, he began to see that he was different from his peers when it came to academics. “They [classmates] really seemed to be struggling with the concepts being taught,” but Wayne did not experience that trouble. Letitia’s face lit up when she talked about starting school. “I loved starting school!” she exclaimed. “School was so exciting because I just like learning new things, and when I first started school, almost everything was new.” Fourth grade was when Letitia realized that she was understanding concepts that her classmates were not, giving her the first inkling that she was academically different from her peers.

Like Letitia, Emmanuel was also excited to start kindergarten, and once he reached first grade, he knew that he was strong in math, probably stronger than most of his classmates. That knowledge and confidence continued through middle school, where he described being “in the zone” when working on more challenging math problems. A love of reading and learning new information made Felicia consider herself a smart child. All of that reading and learning created a curious young girl, and Felicia laughed as she remembered some of the trouble that curiosity caused her. She just “want[ed] to soak up as much knowledge as [she] could.” Donovan also possessed a curious streak that sometimes backfired on him, like when he and his brother made a bottle of soda explode in their kitchen. Always considering himself a smart kid, Donovan enjoyed school, stating, “School just seemed to naturally come easy to me.” Like the other study participants, Reggie loved learning new things at a young age, and once older, wasn’t afraid to put in extra effort to enhance his learning. He told me that during high school, “I

definitely learned to read, write, and do math at a deeper level. I worked hard to get all As and Bs,” but he did not mind putting in that extra effort.

All six participants shared a desire to please others or to make others proud. When Wayne took home his gifted eligibility letter in sixth grade, his mom “told everyone who would listen about my getting into gifted!” He smiled as he told me how much he loved making his mom and grandparents proud of him. In high school, Wayne understood the need to live up to the label of high achiever that his family placed on him in order to not disappoint them. In seventh grade, Letitia “focused on making good grades and keeping the teachers happy.” Emmanuel remembered how proud his mom and grandparents were when he was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society in seventh grade. When he signed an academic scholarship his senior year, his whole family, including his dad, showed up, and he was ecstatic to see how proud of him they were. Felicia “always wanted [her] mom to be proud” of her, even when she was very young. She shared the experience of coloring on her mom’s living room floor and her mom telling Felicia that she was disappointed in her. That devastated Felicia, and she decided she never wanted to disappoint anyone ever again. Donovan talked about not wanting to disappoint his sixth grade teachers since they “made learning interesting and engaging while also making it challenging.” He stated, “I didn’t want to disappoint my teachers who were working so hard to help us learn.” Reggie described a pivotal moment in sixth grade when his math teacher calmly talked to him during what could have been an outburst on Reggie’s part. As the teacher knelt and whispered to him, he “knew then and there that [he] wanted to make Ms. Baker and the rest of the teachers proud of [him],” in both grades and behavior.

The love of a challenge was also mentioned several times by each participant. Wayne talked about how happy he was when he was officially identified as gifted because he “really loved learning, especially social studies,” and he “looked forward to being in a more challenging social studies class” than the year before. Even though Letitia felt challenged in a few classes, she desired more challenge and less busy work in others. Emmanuel lit up when he talked about his first gifted math class, where he “went to class everyday ready to learn something new and to be challenged.” He was hungry for more challenging math problems that required a higher level of critical thinking. Similarly, Felicia fell in love with the challenge of math in elementary school when she started solving more complex problems. This love of a challenge caused Felicia disappointment when, at the beginning of 8th grade, she realized that her regular education classes were not going to present the challenge that her gifted classes presented in the past. Reggie faced that same disappointment when he was removed from his gifted class in elementary school. When given the opportunity to return to the gifted program, Reggie “wanted to be back in gifted classes so badly.” Sure, he missed his friends, but he wanted to finally be challenged academically like he was years before. Donovan discovered his love for challenge at a young age, wanting to read “books with more words and fewer pictures” than the books he was currently reading. He also wanted to solve math problems that his older brother and sister were solving.

My third theme, which focused on participants’ love of learning and of academic challenge, was supported by the literature. According to Siegle and McCoach (2005), when gifted students are presented with interesting, challenging tasks, they are more intrinsically motivated to complete those tasks. However, when gifted students perceive

tasks are too easy for their ability level, they become bored and unmotivated to put much effort into completing the task. Felicia and Reggie were perfect examples of this idea of gifted students needing a challenge. Both participants shared that once they were removed from the gifted program due to behavioral reasons, their classes were no longer exciting or challenging, and they quickly became bored, refusing to put in much effort in those classes where they were mismatched with the learning environment. They lost their desire to learn and to please their teachers, and did not find that desire again until they were allowed to return to the gifted education program.

Strong academic self-confidence, which develops over time, has a significant impact on gifted Black students' achievement and motivation (Grantham & Ford, 2003). When Wayne began to notice that he was not struggling with the same material as his peers, he started gaining confidence in himself as a learner, motivating him to learn new things. The same was true for Donovan, who always considered himself an academically-strong student. This idea of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), a person's belief regarding his or her ability to succeed at a given task, has been linked to motivation, which proved true with all six of this study's participants. When my participants were confident in their academic ability, they put forth more effort towards their work.

I have a personal connection with this theme, as well. One year, I had a gifted Black girl named Anna (pseudonym) in my gifted language arts class. She was extremely creative; in fact, she scored at the 98th percentile on the Torrence Test of Creative Thinking. At that time, I had never seen anyone score that high on that assessment, so I was a bit in awe of her from the beginning of the year. At the end of the first week, Anna came up to my desk after class and told me she knew she was not very good at reading

and writing, so she figured she would be happy to earn a C at the end of the first quarter. I told her some teacherly things, such as, “Yes, but you’ve never been in my class before,” and, “I bet you’re stronger in reading and writing than you think.” But her mind was made up. As the quarter went on, Anna’s scores on assignments and assessments steadily declined. At the end of the quarter, I asked the students to write me an honest note about what grade they should get in the class and how much effort they put in. Anna’s note was very short: I’m not good at this English stuff, so I didn’t put much effort into my work. I spent my time on my illustrations. If I could have only helped her build up her self-efficacy, maybe I would have made a difference.

Theme 4

My fourth theme is: *Participants have a strong need for achievement*. All six participants described experiences that demonstrated the different aspects of a strong need for achievement: learning comes first, achievement over affiliation, and competitive drive. Wayne talked about his grandparents’ expectation that homework be completed as soon as he and his siblings got home from school. He stated, “We’d know when we got home, we’d better get a snack and then get to our homework. That was the expectation and if we didn’t meet it, then we got in trouble.” During Letitia’s childhood, her mother made sure Letitia knew that learning was important and should always come first. Letitia remembered sitting on her mom’s lap, listening to her read a book or tell a story. “She really pushed us to learn as much as we could and to do as well as she knew we could do,” Letitia recalled of her mom. Emmanuel also had a mom, along with grandparents, who pushed him to excel in school, something Emmanuel believes other young Black males did not have. This support from his family made Emmanuel “serious about [his]

academics,” as did a lesson his high school basketball coach shared with the team. ““You are a student athlete, and the word student comes first,”” the coach would remind the players. Emmanuel adopted that mentality and shares it with his own football team today.

Participants also shared their need for achievement over affiliation. According to Fordham (1988), “students who minimize their connection to the indigenous culture and assimilate into the school culture improve their chances of succeeding in school” (p. 57). Wayne recalled his excitement at being identified as gifted because he would “get to be a part of the crowd that [he] wanted to be a part of!” This group of gifted students was all White, except for Wayne, but he knew that was the group he wanted to be in. Donovan reflected on his time in the gifted education program, concluding that had he not been part of that program, he would not have had “the drive to be the best” in his academics, suggesting that being in general education classes may not have given him that push to succeed. He stated that in easier courses, he still could have made friends, but “more of those friends would have probably been Black.” Once he was allowed to reenter the gifted program in middle school, Reggie recalled his non-gifted elementary school friends no longer being a part of his school life, spending more time with peers who were also part of the gifted program. Those old friends would tease Reggie about being in the smart classes, but Reggie knew that he needed to be in those classes if he wanted to make the most of his education.

Letitia, on the other hand, shared more negative feelings when she chose achievement over affiliation. When she was identified as gifted in sixth grade, she realized that she was the only Black student in her gifted classes. “I often felt like I stood out, which could sometimes make me feel lonely,” Letitia said. She lamented the fact that

she was losing kinship with her Black peers because she spent all day in gifted classes with White peers. Letitia was interested in math, science, and robotics, and she felt that those subjects were most associated with White students. She thought to herself, “Well, I can’t be Black and still enjoy these subjects that I love—I can’t be authentic to myself and my culture and still be part of the gifted program.” This created an internal conflict that Letitia determined she would just have to live with because academic achievement was her main goal.

The most discussed component of the need to achieve was a competitive drive. All six participants described, to some degree, feeling competitive with themselves, with their peers, or both. When learning his multiplication tables in elementary school, Wayne recalled questioning why he could not beat two of his classmates on the timed multiplication tests. He chuckled when he told me, “I’d always finish third behind these two other kids. I’d always feel like, ‘Why can’t I beat them?’” Wayne also noticed a competitive drive among his gifted peers, saying the group was “super competitive when it came to school work.” Letitia was allowed to read more complex books than her peers were reading in preschool, making her feel more accomplished than the other students in the classroom. “I think that was the beginning of the competitiveness I’ve always felt within myself,” she stated. “Forget what everyone else was or wasn’t able to read; it was all about me!” Always the student-athlete, Emmanuel shared experiences of his competitive drive both in the classroom and on the field. In third grade, he was competing against his best friend Jason to see who could finish a multiplication facts test the quickest. Right before Emmanuel started to raise his hand, Jason’s hand shot up, indicating that he finished first. “I got so frustrated with myself,” Emmanuel explained, “I

grabbed my glasses off my face and twisted them so hard, I broke them.” That same school year, Emmanuel started feeling that competitive drive in sports, culminating in a stellar relay race performance where he beat out his future football teammate, Tyrese.

When Felicia was removed from the gifted program at the end of seventh grade, she no longer had the competitive streak she once had. The fact that she was no longer in classes with peers of her same ability level became evident very quickly, leaving her dissatisfied with the level of instruction she received. “The only part of eighth grade I really enjoyed,” Felicia said, “was this competition another student and I had going on for most of the year.” She described Juan Carlos (JC) as “this Latinx kid in my math class that I would compete with on every test.” After working together on a set of math problems, Felicia could see how smart JC was, giving her encouragement to work hard in math, her favorite subject, through some friendly competition. As for Donovan, elementary school is where he first began competing with himself but not his classmates. Donovan told me, “I had this drive to be the best I could at everything. I don’t really remember competing with my classmates when it came to school and grades back then, but I do remember competing with myself.” He shared that he wanted to be at the top of his class, and this ambition led him to be “competitive with the guy [he sees] in the mirror.” Like Felicia, Reggie also found himself losing his competitive spirit when he was removed from the gifted program in elementary school. He described the teachers who “were okay teachers, buy they never really challenged [him] beyond what the rest of the class was doing.” Reggie understood that he had more scholastic ability than most of his peers, and he didn’t find it meaningful or fulfilling to compete with peers not on his academic level. “It’s like when a Division 1 football team plays some a team from some

rinky-dink college. Those games aren't much fun for the players, just like competing with those regular kids wasn't much fun for me.”

While all six participants had characteristics of a strong racial identity, they all valued achievement over affiliation with their Black peers. Letitia remembered feeling tremendous internal conflict about being Black and still enjoying math and science, but she decided that, “since my academics were most important to me, I made the decision to tune out those people who didn't truly understand me.” This belief that learning comes first did contradict some of the current literature. For example, Ford, Middleton, Hines, Fletcher Jr., and Moore (2023) suggested that many gifted and high-achieving students, especially culturally-diverse students, face negative peer pressure, resulting in an “anti-achievement ethic” (p. 65) where students sacrifice their academic achievement for fear of losing cultural affiliation. For Emmanuel and Reggie, this dilemma had an additional component: their affiliation with their football teammates. But due to their parents' involvement in and support of their academic lives, both young men chose to be students before they were athletes, just as all six participants chose to be high-achieving instead of strongly-affiliated.

All of my participants possessed some type of competitive drive. Whether it was internal competition, such as Donovan's desire to be the best he could be, or external competition, such as Emmanuel competing against his friend Jason to see who could finish a math test first, a competitive streak was alive in all six participants. While I did not find any literature to support this idea of a competitive spirit in gifted Black students, the overwhelming evidence shared by my participants made it a noteworthy characteristic of this group of students. I can confidently say that this competitive drive was a

characteristic I saw on a daily basis in my gifted language arts classroom. I had tables in my room instead of the traditional desks found in many middle school classroom, and the students at each table became a team for that particular quarter. Teams earned points according to quiz and test averages per table, consistency of completed homework, and participation in class discussions. No one wanted the other teams to earn more points than their team, so students were constantly congratulating or reprimanding their teammates who earned, or did not earn, points. The team with the most points at the end of each week received a small treat, such as a lollipop, pack of Skittles, or a piece of gum. The team with the most points at the end of the quarter, however, earned a pizza party to be held in the classroom, which is like gold to an 8th grader. One year, the competition became so fierce, I had to threaten to do away with the point system! I heard rumors that some students were paying off members from other teams to throw the competition! The threat worked, and students continued on their quest of team dominance.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I used participant quotes to support the four themes I determined to be threads across participants' experiences: (a) *relationships are important to the participants' social and academic lives*; (b) *participants share the characteristics of a strong racial identity*; (c) *participants have a love of learning and of academic challenge*, and; (d) *participants have a strong need for achievement*. I concluded each demonstration of the theme at play in participants' lives with a connection of it to my own thoughts, reactions, and experiences, as well as a connection to the literature. I completed a step-by-step data analysis process to help me determine these themes. I began with *in vivo* coding, which allowed me to choose the words and phrases from my participants that

stood out as significant, such as “competitiveness” and “tight-knit family,” and to keep those codes in my participants’ voices. I then returned to my interview transcripts and read them again, using *emotion* coding because I wanted to focus on the feelings my participants experienced and shared with me during their interviews. Whenever I associated an emotion with a participant’s words, I highlighted the text and wrote the associated emotion in the margin next to the text. Having previously listed and chronologically grouped all of my in vivo codes in a Google Doc, I then took all of the codes and grouped them into categories based on similarities. I took these categories and reduced them to four main topics: *relationships with others*, *strong racial identity*, *love of learning and academic challenge*, and *need for achievement*. I then used each topic to create a sentence, which then became my themes. In the next chapter, I will conclude my dissertation by providing a summary of the study, revisiting my research questions, discussing the study’s limitations, presenting ideas for future studies on the topic of Black gifted students in gifted education programs, and sharing my final thoughts.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

As a former teacher of gifted students and a current coordinator of gifted education, it is my goal to include as many students as possible in gifted programs, including those students who are traditionally underrepresented in such programs. Reflecting on my time in a gifted classroom, where I would have one or maybe two Black gifted students in any given year, caused me to truly stop and reflect on how White those gifted classes actually were. I even dug through some old photos taken of my gifted students and me, looking for more than one Black face. I knew in my brain that there were never many Black students in my classes, but when I confronted the photographic evidence, I realized I knew it in my heart, as well. Looking over the school district's gifted eligibility reports from the past 6 years, I noticed that the list of students who qualified for gifted education was not representative of our school system as a whole. Through this study, I learned that the issue of Black students' underrepresentation in gifted education was not confined to rural Georgia, so I set out to learn what being the lone Black face in a gifted classroom meant to the ones who lived it.

For this qualitative study, I used first-person narrative portraiture and counter-storytelling designed within the theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT) to illustrate how six Black gifted students were able to rise above the structural barriers of gifted education and create successful experiences for themselves (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Interviews of six purposefully-selected participants were the primary source of

data for this study. While all six participants considered their time in gifted education to be overall beneficial to their lives, each had his or her own experiences with the systemic racism tied to being a Black student in a traditionally White educational program. I heard stories of participants excelling in their gifted classes while also being accused of acting White by their peers, of being driven to achieve academic success while often feeling out of place as the lone Black student in their advanced classes.

The themes I constructed from my analysis of the data showed that, even though the participants had their own experiences and stories, they possessed similar characteristics that helped them successfully navigate a gifted education program. The four overarching themes for this study were: (a) *relationships are important to the participants' social and academic lives*; (b) *participants share the characteristics of a strong racial identity*; (c) *participants have a love of learning and of academic challenge*, and; (d) *participants have a strong need for achievement*. Although I will discuss recommendations for further research later in this chapter, I felt it necessary to include here that I will personally use these four themes to help my school system's gifted eligibility team identify potentially gifted students who may not yet be on anyone's gifted radar. Having explored my study's themes, I will now revisit the research questions I sought to answer with this study.

Research Questions Revisited

In this qualitative study, I examined the lived experiences of six Black gifted students who participated in a gifted education program in rural South Georgia at some point during their K-12 career. I purposely chose participants who had graduated from high school within the 5 years prior to the beginning of this study because I believed they

would offer a more mature description of the meanings they gave to their experiences than current Black students enrolled in a gifted program. I also believed these six participants could help me answer my research questions I developed once I completed my review of existing research and established my conceptual framework. I have provided responses to this study's research questions through my interaction with the existing literature and my created themes.

Two main research questions, along with two subquestions, guided this study. My first main research question, which I answered in Chapter 4, was: *What lived experiences did gifted Black students have while participating in a rural gifted education program?* Through each of my participants' interviews, I gained a better understanding of what it was like to be a Black gifted student in a gifted education program. I heard stories about a love of learning, supportive families, supportive classmates, failed tests, academic achievements, and racially-charged accusations. Participants shared their experiences with the gifted eligibility process, from being referred for gifted testing and taking qualifying standardized assessments to finding out they qualified for gifted and entering those classes for the first time. While each participant's personal journey through gifted education was unique, there were several shared experiences among the group, as well.

Before participants began talking about their experiences with gifted education, they each shared how supportive and involved their families were. Luckey and Grantham (2017) posited the importance of families' roles in the lives of gifted Black students by stating, "For gifted Black students, this [parental] attention and advocacy can be essential to help them reach their full potential and overcome the social and psychological barriers that confront them at school" (p. 2). Some participants' parents were married while others

were not. Wayne talked about the academic support he received from his mother and grandparents, as did Emmanuel. Felicia focused on her mother's role in her desire to become a top-notch student, which she developed by attending her mother's night school classes with her. Letitia and Donovan, who lived in two-parent homes, described how their parents nurtured their love of learning beginning at an early age. Likewise, Reggie shared how supportive his mom and stepfather, whom he considered his dad, were regarding both academics and athletics. These experiences with supportive family members laid the foundation for the participants' future trek through gifted education.

Another common thread that ran through the participants' experience was the supportive roles their teachers, other adults, and their friends played in their gifted experiences. Letitia remembered her preschool teacher allowing her to read higher-level books while Felicia shared how her third-grade teacher acted like a school mom, taking Felicia under her wing and pushing her continually challenge herself. The other four participants discussed memorable middle school teachers who made connections with their students and who made learning fun. Their experiences solidified the research conducted by Ford et al. (2008) and Samuels (2018), which found that when gifted Black students had the support of at least one teacher, those students had higher levels of academic achievement. Each participant also had at least one friend who applauded academic successes and appreciated the role academics played in their friend's life, supporting the research conducted by Cross, Bugaj, and Mammadov (2016) where the authors found that having the support of a more academically-focused peer group helped bolster gifted Black students' classroom performance.

As my participants began sharing their stories of participating in gifted education, I noticed that many of their experiences were connected to a strong racial identity. Even when faced with the accusation of acting White, my participants chose the need for achievement over the need for affiliation. Donovan resigned himself to the fact that he was the token Black member of his friend group, which is where his encounters with the acting White accusation originated. Wayne's older brother Shawn told him how much he had changed since being in "those gifted classes" with White students, Wayne was not embarrassed by the accusation; he was upset because he felt his older brother was disappointed in him. Reggie was the outlier when it came to being accused of acting White. After weeks of teasing from his Black football teammates, he decided he was tired of the taunting and fought back. This physical pushback on Reggie's part was the catalyst for his removal from the gifted program and subsequent move to another school system. Overall, however, my participants' experiences contradicted the literature on the burden of acting White (Ogbu, 2004) since they refused to adopt a raceless identity (Fordham, 1988) just to be academically successful.

Because my participants did not adopt a raceless identity within their gifted classes, they were able to display characteristics of a strong scholar identity, as well. Emmanuel, already aware of his high math ability, went to his sixth grade gifted math class ready to learn something new every day. He knew that he was a strong math student, but the desire to keep learning and being engaged in the subject kept growing year to year. Felicia also considered herself a strong math student who enjoyed solving problems more than her classmates seemed to. Letitia was so sure of her academic abilities, she was ready to skip kindergarten and head straight to first grade, and

remembered being a little disappointed when that did not happen. The participants' positive outlook on being known as one of the smart kids and earning the grades to prove it trumped any need they felt for being affiliated with students who were not doing the same.

The first main research question yielded two additional subquestions, which were answered in both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, where I discussed both the commonalities and differences in the participants' experiences. The first subquestion was: *What common experiences did participants find to be life changing and life affirming?* The second subquestion was: *What unique experiences served as important context to each participant's path through gifted education?* All six participants shared the belief that being part of a gifted education program was of tremendous benefit to their lives, even though at times, they encountered negative situations that could have easily discouraged them from participating in higher-level classes. Being placed in gifted education affirmed for students their intelligence, creativity, and need for achievement, showing them and others that they did indeed belong in such a program. These affirmations helped my six participants buck the status quo where, if a Black student becomes eligible for gifted services, he or she will certainly not be successful nor remain in a gifted program for very long.

The second main research question was: *How do gifted Black students make sense of these lived experiences?* I answered this research question in Chapter 5, where I discussed the themes I created after reading and analyzing participants' interview data. Through successfully participating in a gifted education program, my collaborators gained an understanding of how much both the academic and social aspects of the

program would impact their lives. Wayne described how he was forced to relearn how to study once he encountered material that could not just be regurgitated back on an exam. Letitia learned how to use her voice to combat the stereotypes associated with being a Black female who also happened to be quite smart. For Emmanuel, working with his gifted teachers helped him to make sense of his internal frustrations when he was not able to get an answer to a problem immediately. Felicia decided to use her experiences in gifted education to help her notice the gifts and talents of her own Brown and Black students so that they, too, could get the educational opportunities they deserve. As for Donovan, who did not know he was identified as gifted until invited to participate in this study, he was able to finally make sense of his gifted “quirks,” such as his intense curiosity and creativity. Having been removed from the gifted program twice due to behavior reasons, Reggie learned the hard way how unfulfilling it was to be in classes that did not challenge him academically, helping him realize how important it was for him to get his act together and be placed in classes where he belonged.

While my two main research questions, along with two subquestions, guided this study, I also had several goals I hoped to accomplish by the time my study was complete. Using Maxwell’s (2013) framework as a guide, I developed personal, intellectual, and practical goals that kept me from losing my way and getting stuck in the weeds of existing research that would not advance my study. I revisited these goals in the next section.

Goals Revisited

When I set out on this journey, I had personal, intellectual, and practical goals I wanted to achieve by the end of the journey. As a former teacher of gifted students, my

initial goals were personal. I wanted to become more aware of what it was like to be a Black student participating in a traditionally White gifted program. I also wanted learn what made my six participants successful in the gifted program so I could encourage change to the colorblind mentality that often becomes an obstacle for gifted Black students in their pursuit of a more robust, rigorous education. Armed with the knowledge I have gleaned throughout this process, I am more equipped than ever to lead the charge towards equity in gifted education, meeting my intellectual goal. In a practical sense, I was able to elevate the voices of a grossly underrepresented group of students: those that are gifted and Black. Their voices, not my own, are the justification for the changes needed in the recruitment of Black students into gifted programs. As I have gained valuable insights into gifted education through the eyes of six Black students, so, too, can other gifted educators and program managers, leading to the systemic changes necessary to end the inequity within gifted programs.

Implications of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of gifted Black students as they navigated their participation in a rural Georgia gifted education program. The purpose was to illuminate the issue of underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education by sharing the voices of Black students who were academically successful in a rural gifted program, which I accomplished through participant portraits. After thorough data analysis, I created four themes, which provided a basis for this study's implications. While this research focused on gifted Black students' experiences in a gifted education program, the findings have broader implications for other groups, as well.

District and school leaders. The four themes I developed after analyzing my six participants' interview transcripts provided valuable information for school districts and individual schools. While there is not much school district leaders can do about the state-mandated gifted recruitment process, there are steps they can take to foster talent and creativity in Black students starting at an early age, as well as provide professional learning to teachers on how to cultivate and support gifted Black students once they have been identified. All of this study's participants talked about at least one supportive teacher who pushed them to do their best, to strive for excellence, and to accept it when they did not quite achieve that excellence, supporting the literature on retaining Black students in gifted programs (Ford, 2013; Frye & Vogt, 2010; Grantham, 2013; Obi et al., 2014). Providing all classroom teachers, not just those who work with gifted students, with the tools to support and nurture student talents is one way to help retain students, especially culturally-diverse students, in gifted education programs.

Another implication for district and school leaders is promoting culturally-responsive pedagogy (CRP) throughout the district. Again, providing teachers with training in effective CRP practices can help eradicate the colorblindness that so many teachers profess to with regard to student equity. My participants all shared the characteristics of a strong racial identity, which Ford and Harris (1997) found to have a significant impact on Black students' academic achievement. However, if there is a culture of colorblindness within a school system, or within a particular school, leaders and teachers will lack the cultural competency needed to meet gifted Black students' needs. Leaders and, by default, teachers, may fall prey to cultural deficit and/or cultural

conflict theories (Ford, 2013), possibly making gifted classrooms an unwelcome space for gifted Black students.

All six of my participants expressed a strong need for academic challenge as well as for academic achievement, putting the onus on district and school leaders to ensure gifted students are in appropriately challenging classrooms. They need to look at gifted students' data, disaggregating the data to closely inspect and analyze how gifted subgroups, including the Black subgroup, are performing, and then provide teachers with the tools to adjust their instruction for those subgroups of students. If gifted Black students are not achieving at the same levels as their gifted White peers, leaders must take steps to ensure that all students' needs are being met. Underachievement, which is, for many reasons, a significant obstacle to retention in gifted education for gifted Black students, can be a symptom of a gifted program that needs change. Leaders should sense the urgency of getting into gifted classrooms to observe the teaching and learning taking place, and then have hard conversations with teachers when they see that gifted students are not being challenged and/or are underachieving. Leaders should then provide support to teachers in the form of professional learning or mentor support to increase the achievement for gifted Black learners.

Educators. Many of the study's implications for district and school leaders serve as implications for classroom teachers, as well. Teachers are on the front lines when it comes to cultivating gifted Black students' academic achievement and success. Based on the experiences of my six study participants, having a supportive teacher on their side certainly made a difference in their lives as gifted Black students. Understanding the unique needs of gifted students, especially those of culturally-diverse students, is

imperative to building a strong relationship between teacher and student. This understanding can be gained by teachers completing a gifted endorsement program, where they will study the characteristics and quirks found in so many of their gifted students. Once a teacher truly understands a student, he or she can build a strong, supportive relationship with that student.

Another implication for teachers is seeking and participating in culturally-responsive pedagogy training. Ford (2013) posited that culturally-responsive teaching for gifted students as a topic for professional development was essential for both recruitment and retention of Black students in gifted programs. My six participants all shared experiences that illustrated their strong racial identities, such as having a strong connection to their Black culture. Although Letitia felt like she was losing that connection in her White middle school gifted program, she found herself reconnecting to her Black culture once she became part of the more diverse high school band. Letitia also remembered how she felt unseen when every piece of literature she was assigned in school was written by and about White people “doing White people things.” Teachers who are lacking in authentic culturally-responsive practices may not realize the message they are sending when none of the class’ materials mirror the cultures in the classroom. I know that, as a classroom teacher, it never crossed my mind that I never assigned any literature by other cultures, but now, I wish I could go back and apologize to all of my gifted Black students for not being more culturally-aware of their needs.

Just as gifted Black students need to have their cultural needs met in order to be successful, they also need to have their academic needs met. The need for challenge and achievement was a constant thread woven through all of my participants’ stories. Both

Reggie and Felicia described how unmotivated they felt when placed in regular education classes because the level of academic challenge they were used to was not provided in their new classroom environments. Again, this is where targeted, research-supported professional learning can provide teachers with the knowledge they need to design curriculum and instruction that addresses both the cultural and cognitive rigor needed for gifted Black students' success. Teachers can learn the various reasons their gifted Black students may be underachieving along with ways to support those students who may be facing removal from gifted programming.

State-level decision makers. Underrepresentation of culturally-diverse students in gifted education has been a blight on the educational system for decades. The struggle I had while securing participants for this study underscored the legal segregation caused by gifted education. Out of 5 graduating classes from Liberty Valley High School, there were only 13 Black students who were identified as gifted based on Georgia state rule. That fact alone should prove to state-level decision makers that they need to take another look at the eligibility requirements for being identified as gifted in Georgia. Based on current research, the Liberty County School System is not an anomaly; the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education is a nationwide issue. It is time that state leaders move away from using standardized assessment national norms to using more equitable local norms. According to Peters, Makel, and Rambo-Hernandez (2021), "If implemented at scale, local norms would result in greatly-improved equity within identified populations" (p. 95). Gifted Black students need to see peers who look like them in their gifted classes, as Letitia alluded to when she said being the only Black student in her classes made her feel "like I stood out, which could sometimes make me

feel lonely.” Thankfully, Letitia had a support system in place so she felt confident staying in those White gifted classes.

Decision makers at the state level could also provide funding to school districts that prioritize professional learning in both gifted education and culturally-responsive pedagogy. The more knowledge and understanding of the unique characteristics culturally-diverse gifted students bring to the classroom, the more likely the gifted classroom teacher as well as the gifted students will be successful in meeting the needs of these learners. Just as it is not acceptable for teachers and school leaders to claim to be colorblind, neither is it appropriate for state-level decision makers to make that claim. Ford (2013) reiterated her premise that “all educators must understand, respect, and be responsive to their culturally different students,” (p. 13) meaning that educators and those who make laws that affect educators can no longer proclaim to be colorblind. Erasing the idea of a colorless educational system starts with knowledge, and school leaders and classroom teachers need to be given the opportunity to gain the knowledge needed to support their culturally-diverse gifted students.

Limitations of the Study

As with most research studies, there were inherent limitations to this study. According to Patton (2015), the qualitative researcher must identify and disclose all limitations within a study in order to establish credibility and trustworthiness. A study’s limitations may also affect the implications of the study as well as any recommendations for future research. This study was limited to the lived experiences shared by six recently graduated gifted Black students in rural South Georgia. The purposeful sample of six gifted Black students was limited in gender to two Black females. Participants graduated

from rural high schools in the same region of rural South Georgia, so an additional limitation would be transferability to other gifted Black students in other rural or non-rural educational settings.

Another limitation of this study lies in the practice of cross-cultural interviewing. According to Patton (2015), “Cross-cultural inquiries add layers of complexity to the already-complex interactions of an interview” (p. 480), so I strived to establish rapport, to be authentic and trustworthy, and to be nonjudgmental. Because I am White, it was impossible for me to completely understand how my Black participants experience the world or the meanings my participants attached to their experiences. To compensate for this limitation, I presented each participant’s narrative in his or her own words as much as possible. I then asked each participant to review his or her narrative to ensure that I captured the essence of their stories.

Researcher bias was also a limitation of this study. As a former teacher of gifted students, I strived to keep my emotions in check while listening to the participants’ experiences. When I found myself getting angry at or saddened by an experience described by a participant, I made myself a note to memo about my feelings later, after the interview ended, so that I could stay in the moment, remaining nonjudgmental during the interview. Through the process of reflexivity (Merriam, 2002), I was able to critically reflect on my being the primary instrument for data collection, using researcher memos to ensure that I captured my participants’ stories correctly without making assumptions based on my own biases.

While I believe this study showed the need for systemic change in rural gifted education programs to meet the needs of gifted Black students, I also believe it is

important that other researchers conduct similar studies to support, or even contradict, my findings. More current, relevant research should be conducted with other groups of gifted Black and culturally-diverse students in order to provide them what they need to be academically confident and successful, setting them up for a bright future. Having reviewed the limitations of my study, I have determined ways the topic of Black gifted students' experiences in gifted education programs could be studied in the future.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study adds new information to the existing body of literature on the underrepresentation of gifted Black students in gifted education program and the experiences of those successful students in such programs. When I began researching this topic, I found myriad studies on the reasons why Black students were underrepresented in gifted education, but very few studies that looked at the issue through the eyes of a gifted Black student. Using the portraits of Wayne, Letitia, Emmanuel, Felicia, Donovan, and Reggie, those interested in making changes to the inequitable opportunities afforded to gifted Black students can glean information straight from those who have been a successful piece of a legally-segregated educational program.

Future research could focus on gifted Black students in other rural school systems throughout the state of Georgia, as well as in non-rural school systems across the state, to determine what procedures are in place to help gifted Black students be academically successful. Studies could also be conducted in other states where the criteria for gifted eligibility mimics that of Georgia so that comparisons could be made among students who were determined eligible for services in similar ways. Alternatively, studies could be conducted in states with different gifted eligibility criteria, such as the use of local norms,

to determine which procedures allow for greater equity in gifted programs. Further research could also explore the long-term outcomes of participating in a gifted education program on Black students, including a comparison between gifted Black students who participated in such a program and those who did not.

While this study used portraiture and counter-storytelling to illustrate the good and successful stories, the fact that all six participants were, indeed, successful in a gifted education program, contradicted most of the literature I reviewed for this study. Future research could purposefully select gifted Black students who were not successful in a gifted educational program to determine how or why their experiences were different from the ones presented in this study. In addition, future researchers could study unsuccessful students, or students who chose not to participate in a gifted education program, in states with both similar and different gifted eligibility criteria from that of Georgia.

Finally, similar studies on the lived experiences of gifted Black students should be conducted by Black researchers in order to reduce the potential complexities cross-cultural research can bring. As a White researcher, I believe that my race initially prevented participants from letting go of their inhibitions and fully engaging in interviews. Once the participants seemed comfortable with me, their stories began flowing more freely, but precious time was spent on gaining participants' trust. Perhaps if the interviews were conducted by a Black researcher, the participants would have warmed up to him or her more easily, letting their stories flow more freely.

Final Thoughts

As race and racism continue to play a critical role in educational systems (Delpit, 2006), and gifted education programs perpetuate educational segregation, I set out to use this study to elevate the voices of my participants and advocate for change in policies and procedures within gifted education programs. In the world of gifted education, I wanted to “dismantle systemic inequality by calling attention to it” (Marx, 2008, p. 163), which is an ambitious goal of critical race theorists. Even though there were so few gifted Black students who could have participated in this study, the ones who did shared not only their struggles, but their victories, as well. These victories pitted the participants against the status quo of underachieving, unmotivated gifted Black students navigating a fundamentally racist part of educational programming.

As I began interviewing each of the participants, I expected to hear tales of some positive experiences and some negative experiences during their time in gifted education. I expected them to give me surface-level experiences they could hardly remember from years ago. The teacher in me should have remembered, however, to always expect the unexpected when it comes to gifted students.

I honestly never expected to become as emotionally attached to my participants and their stories as I did. Wayne’s observation of a perceived lack of parental support in other Black homes in his hometown made me wonder if there was more I and other district leaders could do to provide parents with the knowledge and support they might need to help cultivate their students’ gifts and talents. Reflecting on my time as a teacher of gifted students, I was embarrassed to admit that maybe I let Trayvion down when I so easily used his lack of parental support as an excuse for his underachievement in class.

Letitia, the little spitfire, inspired me with her stories of standing up for herself when she felt stereotyped as a Black student, as well as when she felt unjustly treated by her White math teacher. Thinking of some of the gifted teachers I currently work with, Letitia could have gotten much worse than just a one-time lunch detention. As an educator, it was exciting to see how Emmanuel's eyes lit up when talking about his math teacher personally seeking him out to be back in her gifted math class. This small effort on the teacher's part just solidified his love of math and his scholastic ability. Now he is working on steps to become a math teacher himself, a future he may not have imagined if not for those challenging math classes he took once upon a time.

Felicia had participated in gifted programs since 2nd grade and was always successful academically. Then hormones hit in 7th grade, and she got into some trouble that was unrelated to her academics. While I never asked the specifics of the incident that caused her removal from the gifted program, it hurt and then I got angry when she said, "I guess girls who did things that got them suspended from school didn't belong in smart-kid classes." She received an appropriate behavioral consequence by being suspended from school, but what did her participation in gifted classes have to do with this particular behavior? She didn't stop being gifted just because she made an error in judgment.

Donovan reminded me of a little kid when he talked about his curious streak, which one time resulted in a messy kitchen, as well as when he talked about his leadership skills, evident by employing his classmates as bodyguards and paying them with peppermint candies. It made me wonder how many other Donovans could be out there with no outlet for their creativity, being forced into rote memorization instead of being encouraged to explore. When Reggie described the bullying he endured simply because he did not hide

his scholar identity from his peers, my eyes welled up with tears. I was heartbroken when he said with a shaky voice, “Because of my behavior, they took my education away from me.” Would Reggie have suffered the same consequences if the school’s administrators had a better understanding of gifted Black students’ needs? What could have happened if he did not have an upstander in his math teacher, Ms. Baker? I fear he would have become another gifted Black student who missed out on the educational opportunities he deserved.

If I had never conducted this study and had only read the existing literature on the issue of the underrepresentation of gifted Black students in gifted education programs, I could have easily felt that all was lost and there were only depressing stories and unfortunate outcomes for this group of students. Even after studying the literature, I was sure I would hear stories of my participants’ underachievement and lack of motivation because they wanted to still belong to the group of their gifted peers. Yet, these students who bucked the status quo and decided, whether consciously or subconsciously, let their love of learning and desire for achievement trump the negatives they encountered along their journey. My hope is that these six young people can inspire change in racist policies and procedures and encourage other gifted Black students to do the same.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board Approval



Institutional Review Board (IRB) For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04143-2021

Responsible Researcher(s): Robin Cartright

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Richard Schmertzing

Project Title: *Counter-Storytelling: Portraits of Black Students' Experiences in a Rural Gifted Education Program.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *To maintain the transparency and integrity of your research study, all district and school level data must be formally requested and received from an authorized representative of the school district.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, or sharing of identifiable participant information (e.g. recordings).*
- *Audio/video recordings are **permitted** under Exempt protocol guidelines provided the recordings are used for the sole purpose of creating an accurate transcript. The recordings must be deleted immediately from all devices upon creation of the transcript.*
- *To avoid accidental discovery of who participated, pseudonym lists must be maintained in a separate and secure file from name lists, data sheets, transcripts, etc.*
- *Upon completion of this research study all collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie *04.09.2021*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 06.02.16

Appendix B

Permission to Conduct Research

Permission to Conduct Research

March 11, 2021
Dr. Lisa Williams, Superintendent
Thomas County Schools
200 N. Pinetree Blvd.
Thomasville, GA 31792

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Dr. Williams:

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study within your school system. I am currently enrolled in the curriculum and instruction doctoral program at Valdosta State University and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled "Counter-Storytelling: Portraits of Gifted Black Students' Experiences in a Rural Gifted Education Program."

If approval is granted, I will collect two types of data from your school system: demographic and contact information about recently-graduated gifted students, and observation data from K-12 gifted classrooms. For this study, I will be interviewing Black gifted students who have recently graduated from your school system. While these are not current students, I will need information about the participants such as gender, race, and gifted eligibility status. I will also observe in various gifted classrooms, videoing each observation. Any student who has a *Do Not Publicize* document on file will not be included in the video.

The individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential. No costs will be incurred by either your school system or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have. You may contact me via phone (229-403-1823) or by email (rlcartright@valdosta.edu).

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Alternatively, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution's letterhead acknowledging your consent for me to conduct this study at your institution.

Sincerely,

Robin Cartright
Robin Cartright, Valdosta State University

Approved by *Lisa Williams*
Printed Name: Lisa Williams

Date: 3/12/21

Appendix C
Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Interview 1: Participant's Life History

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Tell me about yourself as a child.
3. What was life like for you growing up in your home?
4. What is your earliest school memory?
5. How did you feel about school?
6. What did you think about learning new things?
7. What types of friendships did you have during your elementary school years?
8. What do you remember most about your elementary teachers?
9. How were your relationships with your teachers?
10. What were your friendships like in middle school?
11. Tell me about your relationships with your middle school teachers.
12. What was high school like for you?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to add to your school story?

Interview 2: Participant's Detailed Experiences

1. How did you first come to realize you may have been gifted?
2. How did you feel when you were identified as gifted?
3. What was school like once you were identified as gifted?
4. How did your family react when you were identified as gifted?
5. Did your teachers address your needs as a gifted student? If they did, how? If not, how did that make you feel?
6. How were you able to see or not see yourself in other gifted students?
7. What was life like for you as a gifted high school student?
8. Did being identified as gifted affect the social experience of school for you? If so, how?

9. How did participating in a gifted program make a difference in your life?
10. What perceptions did you have of your gifted peers?
11. What perceptions did you have about your non-gifted peers?

Interview 3: Participant's Reflection on Meaning

1. What do you think your school life would have been like if you and/or your parents had rejected placement in the gifted program?
2. How do you make sense of the influence your identification as gifted has had on the experiences you have shared?
3. How do you make sense of the role race has played on the experiences you have described?
4. How has your experience as a gifted Black student influenced your post-secondary life?

Note: More questions and prompts will be added after each of the previous interviews.

Appendix D
Validity Matrix

Validity Matrix

| <i>What do I need to know?</i> | <i>Why do I need to know this?</i> | <i>What kind of data will answer these questions?</i> | <i>Data Analysis</i> | <i>Validity Threats</i> | <i>Possible Strategies for Dealing with Validity Threats</i> |
|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| <p>What reflections do gifted Black students have regarding their participation in a rural gifted education program?</p> <p>How do gifted Black students' perceptions of their experiences with their gifted peers compare to their experiences with their non-gifted peers?</p> <p>How does culture manifest in traditional gifted students and Black gifted students in P-12 public rural schools?</p> | <p>To understand how the experiences of these students influence their participation in a gifted program</p> <p>To understand how relationships impact these students' experiences</p> <p>To better understand how culture could impact a gifted student's experience</p> | <p>Interview transcripts from a three-interview series with participants</p> <p>Use of an interview matrix</p> <p>Video recordings from gifted classroom observations</p> | <p>Audio and video taping</p> <p>Transcription</p> <p>Coding</p> <p>Narrative analysis</p> | <p>Researcher subjectivity and reflexivity</p> | <p>Monitor subjective I's</p> <p>Use memo writing to manage researcher subjectivity and reflexivity</p> <p>Use of qualitative data analysis software to include interview transcripts</p> <p>Member checks of interview transcripts for accuracy</p> |

Adapted from *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach* (pp. 130-134), by J. A. Maxwell, 2013, Thousand Oaks, CA:

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