RACE TALK AND “STRUCTURAL DISPLACEMENT” OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN A SMALL URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT IN THE MIDWEST

BY

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DISsertation

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ABSTRACT

I examine the race talk dilemmas of school officials in public school meetings over a 20 year period to attempt to understand why racialized policies and practices still persist against African American students at Blakesdale School District. The research provides insight into the inner workings of beliefs and values of educational leaders at Blakesdale regarding issues of desegregation, equity, and diversity with a hope that the findings in this study could offer empirical strategies for school improvement through racial harmony. The study also seeks to contribute to the body of literature on the value of integration in public schools and how it can enhance the experiences of marginalized groups within the education system in the United States. My analysis is a structural approach that calls for more progressive way of thinking about public schooling from the bottom up. This study is a critical ethnography used to investigate the impact of race talk on education policymaking structurally at the local school district level. I examine the ways in which structural intersectionality and race talk dilemmas reveal the systemic operationalization of whiteness in education policy and the ways in which education policies are used to carry out social injustices discursively among vulnerable groups in public school systems. This study is situated at the intersection of education policy and society. The three questions that guide this study are 1) What ways did school officials’ public discourse about student achievement and disciplinary disparities suggest the need for changes in the school culture and building equity in Blakesdale school district?; 2) What systems of meaning about low-income and minority students are revealed through public discourses at school and district public meetings?; and 3) How did the race talk of school officials preserve disparate disciplinary and academic practices at Blakesdale?
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CHAPTER 1: RACE TALK AND TWENTY YEARS OF “STRUCTURAL DISPLACEMENT” OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS: A CONSENT DECREE AND THE QUEST FOR EQUITY

In this dissertation, I examine the race talk dilemmas of school officials in public school meetings over a 20 year period to attempt to understand why racialized policies and practices still persist against African American students at Blakesdale School District. The research provides insight into the inner workings of beliefs and values of educational leaders at Blakesdale regarding issues of desegregation, equity, and diversity with a hope that the findings in this study could offer empirical strategies for school improvement through racial harmony. The study also seeks to contribute to the body of literature on the value of integration in public schools and how it can enhance the experiences of marginalized groups within the education system in the United States. My analysis is a structural approach that calls for more progressive way of thinking about public schooling from the bottom up. This study is a critical ethnography used to investigate the impact of race talk on education policymaking structurally at the local school district level. I examine the ways in which structural intersectionality and race talk dilemmas reveal the systemic operationalization of whiteness in education policy and the ways in which education policies are used to carry out social injustices discursively among vulnerable groups in public school systems. This study is situated at the intersection of education law and society. The three questions that guide this study are 1) What ways did school officials’ public discourse about student achievement and disciplinary disparities suggest the need for changes in the school culture and building equity in Blakesdale school district?; 2) What systems of meaning about low-income and minority students are revealed through public discourses at school and district public meetings?; and 3) How did the race talk of school officials preserve disparate disciplinary and academic practices at Blakesdale?
According to historian James D. Anderson (1994), race is a major ideology that is central to social thought and culture in American life since the Colonial Era. He notes that Americans become indoctrinated with the ideas about race and racism through lies taught in history classes and textbooks. As a nation, the United States has been unwilling to examine the racial ideology that forms systems of oppression and social injustices in our society. Formal schooling is the site for socially conditioning students in racial ideas. Therefore, there is a need for anti-racist education which includes a critical discourse of race and racism in society and seeks structural reforms to address intersectional systems of social oppression (Dei, 1996). The continuous national refusal to adhere to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* to integrate public schools in the United States is central to understanding public school failure and the persistence of unequal educational opportunities for African Americans (Fruchter, 2007). Researching school desegregation requires an analysis of structural racism by highlighting the relationship between marginalized citizens and the legal system in the United States. A structural view of racism reveals how school-community factors affect students of color while taking into account how instances of racial disparities are connected to historical and current sociopolitical policies embedded in white supremacy (Blaisdell, 2016). It is vital to consider how race and racism is enacted through education policy systemically, such that ideas of race and racism become viewed as natural, inevitable, and permanent (Tuck & Gorlewska, 2016). Segregation of schools contribute to the formation of an apartheid school system in the U.S. (De Lissovoy, 2008). One of the goals of school integration was to offer quality educational opportunities to all students in public schooling. However, quality education is now discussed and measured in educational research by scores on standardized tests and the race-based concept of the
achievement gap that public schools around the country are attempting to narrow no matter how segregated the schools may be.

**Background to the Problem**

On November 9, 1999, the Planning and Implementation Committee (PIC) at Blakesdale School District met during their regular meeting to continue to discuss ways in which the school district could find a solution to issues raised by a complaint from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) filed in 1998 which cited the district for being out of compliance for racial fairness and involuntary busing. Mr. James Turner is a local African American activist who has spent all of his adult life fighting against systemic racism in Blakesdale County. Mr. Turner’s work is central to residential and school desegregation efforts in Blakesdale County. “Mr. Turner stated that the OCR complaint was filed as a complaint about racial fairness and an unfair burden on African-American students in bussing. He said the district has an obligation to comply with the terms of the agreement in due haste. He cited current imbalances and requested the district develop a plan or show how it is complying with the terms of the agreement.” The conversation continued, “Ms. Sikes [a Black local community activist and educator] concurred [with Mr. Turner] that structural displacement remained an issue.” Structural displacement is a term used by members of PIC to describe the racial unfairness and segregation issues in the district for African American students.

Blakesdale School District
Planning and Implementation Committee (PIC)
Meeting Minutes, November 23, 1999
4:10 p.m.

Dr. Lane [the school superintendent] distributed copies of the Controlled Choice MOU. Mr. Turner claimed the district was out of compliance with the terms of the choice agreement for the second year in a row and requested PIC concur with that determination and direct the Superintendent and Board of Education to bring student assignments into compliance immediately. Ms. Becky [a white committee member and teacher] noted that Dr. Shultz [a Black
educational consultant] discussed the need to identify reasons a building may move out of compliance, then take the appropriate steps to remedy it for the following year rather than rescind students’ building assignments. She said she would have preferred the district be more pro-active in this matter, but feels the district is working in good faith to meet the terms and spirit of the agreement. Mr. Turner said he disagreed with Dr. Lane’s feelings that we shouldn’t worry about complete compliance and instead fix any problem areas that arise without reassigning students. The Superintendent stated that he would not remove or reassign students in the middle of a school year; Ms. Sikes and Ms. King [a Black teacher and committee member] concurred that moving students mid-year was not in their best interest, although a plan to address concerns about areas that could affect compliance rates was warranted. Mr. Turner asked for a consensus from PIC meetings on this issue at the December 8th meeting, adding that if it doesn’t come out of the PIC, he will move elsewhere, including filing a suit against the district.”

During PIC meetings from 1998-2000, Mr. Turner asked the committee about its plan to comply with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) guidelines for racial fairness. The issue was not given the attention it deserved so in this meeting, Mr. Turner explicitly threatened to file a lawsuit against the district if they “didn’t immediately ensure compliance with the racial fairness guidelines” of the OCR by the December 8, 1999 meeting.

Resistance to federal integration mandates is indicative of larger problem in US history of racism in public schooling. Involuntary bussing of African American students to predominately white schools did not only occur in the South. Overt violence and massive resistance to integration happened in cities like Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Fruchter, 2007; Rubin, 1972). One of the ways a California school district resisted integration was to refuse to articulate a plan for integration (Rubin, 1972). Blakesdale handled involuntary bussing mandates in the same way during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mr. Turner and the African American community and its allies at Blakesdale were forced to seek recourse through the courts to get the school district to comply with federal law around integration.

Mr. Turner stated the OCR complaint was filed as a complaint about racial fairness and an unfair burden on African-American students in bussing. He said the district has an obligation to comply with the terms of the agreement in due haste. He cited current imbalances and requested the district develop a plan or show how it is complying with the terms of the agreement. It was noted that late notifications of retentions and sibling
assignments caused some imbalances, but that Dr. Shultz has recommended that measures be established to avoid such problems next year and avoid changing student assignments. Mr. Turner continued to complain about the disproportionate number of seats south of University Avenue and said African-American students were still being mandatorily assigned; it was noted that, in essence, white students were also being “assigned” to a local elementary school since that was the only school with available seats at this time (PIC meeting minutes, 11/9/1999).

White school committee members used race talk to deflect from any specific conversations of integration implementation and planning to comply with racial fairness guideline of the OCR.

Members discussed definitions of “equity” and “diversity,” the district’s commitment to these concepts in policies and procedures; the need for increased parent involvement, particularly among African-American parents; the district’s responsibility to take actions to bridge the gap between socio-economic classes; and the need for continuing communication between schools and parents and the community. Mr. Turner requested the district assist parents in becoming more active members of the district and in students’ learning processes, stating that it was the district’s responsibility to bridge the achievement gap among students. Ms. Becky advised against designing specific definitions to avoid any future limitations of activities. She felt it was important to understand the district’s use of these terms, particularly diversity, when activities are said to address such issues (PIC meeting minutes, 10/14/1999).

There was an existing complaint against the school district from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) filed by several African American parents for discrimination in 1998. Blakesdale School District struggled to comply with the regulations and guidelines set by the OCR. The district entered into a federal consent decree in 2001, and the complaint with the OCR was added to that lawsuit. Blakesdale remained under the consent decree for 10 years. The purpose of the consent decree was an order of the court designed to guide Blakesdale School District in restructuring their resources and programs to become more racially equitable for everyone. The consent decree was used as an instrument for desegregation in Blakesdale public schools. The consent decree is a form of legal recourse that attempts to dismantle legacies and realities of separate and unequal treatment of Blacks that have been prevalent since the beginning of the US public education system (Prestage & Prestage, 1989). The way that race intersects in schools is
when school officials have a deficit view about certain groups of students and their families. Their deficit beliefs limits the quality of education the students receive. These limitations created by racism in schools determine who has access to certain resources and privileges, whose voice is heard and whose voice is silenced as well as who holds key positions over the marginalized other (Orelus, 2011). After four extensions to the original consent decree filed in 2001, Blakesdale School District was released from it in 2011. However, issues of inequity and racial discrimination still persist against African American students today.

Blakesdale School District
Discipline and Equity Taskforce, Meeting Minutes
January 12, 2017

Ronald Jackson [a Black educational leader and DE taskforce chair] stated that our District is lucky to be able to offer professional training on myriad topics. He said when compared to demographically-like school districts that offer fewer professional growth opportunities, our academic and behavior outcomes are similar. He asked those present to hypothesize why our inputs don’t result in greater outputs. One committee member said she feels the District changes directions too frequently. Other committee members believed the outputs don’t equal the inputs due to racial impacts. Caleb Williams [a white male committee member and alternate school board member] said he thinks neighborhood schools where students of like races learn together and school resources are within walking distance from home would have a positive impact on African-American student success. He and Ms. Wright [a Black educator and committee member] stated that having African-American staff working with African-American students often affords an automatic level of comfort for African-American students and reduces their sense of isolation. It was acknowledged that neighborhood schools would mean some schools would be racially identifiable; however, it was also noted that despite Schools of Choice, some schools are still racially identifiable. Other committee members noted drawbacks to neighborhood schools saying integrating students of different races and cultures helps to bridge differences and enhance racial harmony. Mr. Seawald [a white male school principal and committee member] asked what student data of like-districts with neighborhood schools looks like. Mr. Jackson said he did not have that data. Mr. Jackson noted that prior to the Consent decree, Blakesdale had neighborhood schools and academic achievement was worse. If neighborhood schools were the model, Caleb suggested that resources be re-allocated so that the schools with the highest needs receive the most resources.

The master narrative here is about the use of school segregation as a way to improve school achievement for African American students. Blakesdale employs a controlled choice program where parents can list the schools they would like for their students to attend and the
placements are supposed to be decided through a lottery. However, educational leaders state that this program has not worked to mix the racial demographics of the school district equally. They also say that schools in the district that were racially identifiable had lower academic achievement than more integrated schools. This statement is in line with a body of research that shows that African American students have higher levels of academic achievement when they are in integrated schools (Cooper & Jordan, 2009; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Mickelson, 2005; Noguera, 2006; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Orfield et al, 2004; Reardon, 2015; Rothstein & Santow, 2012). School officials at Blakesdale are discussing ways of implementing some of the same discriminatory policies and practices that required the district to mandate involuntary bussing and which ultimately placed the district under a federal consent decree. These organizational policies and practices seem neutral and inclusive in nature because they are applied to everyone equally, however the effects disadvantage certain groups while privileging others (Sue, 2015).

There remains an affinity by some towards the concept of neighborhood schooling (Parcel & Taylor, 2015). Neighborhood schools are connected to notions of public schooling as centers of community life (Crowson et al., 2018). However, neighborhood schools tend to be racially identifiable as well as the communities where they are located. Public education services and resources are not adequately distributed to these schools. The African American community at Blakesdale has had to rely on federal interventions to drive equity-based policymaking efforts in the school district. It is evident that there is a desire by some educational leaders in the district to segregate students of color from the rest of the student body in the public school system. Wanda mentioned that having “African-American staff members working with African-American students often affords an automatic level of comfort for African-American students
and reduces their sense of isolation.” Research studies show that 80% of the teaching workforce in public and private schools are white and that teacher diversity matters in student learning outcomes especially for boys (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2018; Holt & Gershenson, 2015; Miller, 2008). Researchers say that same race teacher-students relationships are more likely to increase academic achievement by students of color. According to these recent research findings, teachers may sometimes treat students differently based implicit biases of students from certain backgrounds.

**Conceptual Sketch: Structural Intersectionality and Race Talk Dilemmas**

The structural realm of power refers to how institutions are organized. Intersectionality examines intersecting power relations of race, class, and gender and the ways in which the relations shape the institution (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality is a way of looking at problems and causes for these problems. It also explores when social forces of injustice overlap structurally to do harm (Crenshaw, 2018). Intersectionality does not mean diversity. This is why a critical discourse analysis is required to name and center race and racism adequately within a structural intersectional framework. The historical purpose of school desegregation policies are connected to ideas of civil rights and educational access for everyone. Since *Brown*, our public schools have become the site where we attempt to deal with racial problems (Ladson-Billings, 2004). School segregation must be dismantled systemically alongside neighborhood segregation in order to disrupt issues of a separate and unequal society (Powell et al., 2001). Legal scholar Charles Lawrence (1980) believes that the *Brown* case has not abolished school segregation because the Court’s way of thinking about segregation denied the reality of race and racism in America. Lawrence says the problem of segregation “comes from its “system” or “institution” rather than from “particular segregating acts,” (1980, p. 50).
Crenshaw (2011) writes that her theoretical concept of intersectionality was explicitly an interventionist response to institutional and political rhetoric that were being ignored. The article sought to outline the discursive terrain in which an intersectional framework provided a structural critique of rights and legal institutions, and the ways that ideological structures were designed to maintain oppression. Structural intersectionality as a theoretical framework can be applied in Blakesdale’s case to identify and examine how whiteness is operationalized in educational policies against African American students. Race talk dilemmas serve to show how structural intersectionality is co-opted discursively by white school district leaders to deflect away from implementing federal mandates to maintain discriminatory actions against African American students.

The culture of policy framework discloses how policy-driven language and procedures of public schooling conflict with stated equitable aims of racial and ethnic inclusions while promoting systems of stigmatization and deficit thinking strategies (Stein, 2004). The way we think about discrimination influences how politics and policies are structured so that hardships are categorized as singular issues (Crenshaw, 1989). The race talk of school officials at Blakesdale disclose the degree to which their ideologies and tensions about race, class, gender, and disability inform their work and become enacted in local school policymaking, and contribute to personal and professional conflicts.

Race talk is important to explore because it allows us to understand how powerful social groups gain and maintain their status systemically. Educational policies like school choice are not working to alleviate racial disparities in public schooling. Institutional racism is socially shared prejudices that are collaboratively manufactured through institutional discourses (Dijk, 2001). Race talk dilemmas reveal differences in worldviews that are challenged publicly. It
involves an unequal status relationship of power and privilege among participants (Sue, 2015; Sue et al., 2009; Young & Davis-Russell, 2002). Race talk is thought of as a form of storytelling that depicts historical and cultural themes of racial progress and social justice for all, and of meritocracy and colorblindness also referred to as white talk (Bell, 2002, 2003; Bolgate, 2005; Pollock, 2004; Sue, 2015). Intersectionality is race talk. However, race talk may not always mean that issues of race and racism are being acknowledged (Crenshaw, 2018). Counter-narratives of race talk are extremely threatening to whites and to our society because they demonstrate how power and privilege work and how white talk justifies ways in which people of color and other marginalized social categories are subjugated (Bell, 2003; Sue, 2005).

Educational opportunities for marginalized students are mediated by school officials’ ideologies of race, class, disability, and gender. Their beliefs about the students limits the quality of education the students receive.

Education policy in the United States today is perceived, developed, and enacted in ways that put whiteness in the most powerful position of every racist ordering. White, primarily middle-class norms of language and culture, are consistently privileged in institutions of public education, regardless of the presence of teachers and students of color (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016, p. 200).

When public discourse from institutions like Blakesdale become racialized so as to produce practices of discrimination, this form of discourse can lead to state and federal level consent decrees and other forms of lawsuits that attempt to hold the school system accountable for their discriminatory rhetoric and practices.

Racialized schemes such as school segregation violates social justice values and equitable access for all communities to benefit (Cortez, 2013; Rowe, 2017). The African American community formed a social movement to counter segregation efforts at Blakesdale School District. A controlled choice plan was adopted to facilitate an equity measure to bring about
racial balance in the district. The choice plan failed to provide racial balance and equity in academic achievement. Disciplinary disparities continue to flourish along with African American students being disproportionately overrepresented in special education placements. The African American community continues to face consistent resistance from school officials to make the necessary changes to provide equitable public education services to everyone. One of the stipulations for ending the consent decree in 2011 was for Blakesdale to form committees to help the district ensure racial fairness and equity in the district. The committees are supposed to be open and advertised to the public and have representation from various communities in the school district.

School officials at Blakesdale formed these committees, but demonstrate pseudo support for racial harmony by convening public meetings that are not well advertised to the public and are not attended by families and community stakeholders. The master narrative at these meetings reflect interracial intolerance and discriminatory behaviors and practices by school officials at Blakesdale towards marginalized populations in the school district. The district has been under review for overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs that has currently resulted in a citation by the state. More African American students are disproportionately suspended or expelled from school than any other racial category.

**Context of Local Research Site and Participants**

Blakesdale School District, like many school districts, struggle to balance race in its school composition, academic programs, and disciplinary practices. On August 2, 2007, the fourth plaintiff’s response monitoring report was submitted to the United States District Court in Central Illinois that stated specific concerns regarding the consent decree. The authors of the report were all noted educational scholars as well as the plaintiffs’ attorney who worked with
Blakesdale as consultants during the mediation process under the consent decree. The report stated,

Since 2002, we have consistently expressed deep concern about the District’s slow or ineffective Consent Decree implementation. The Monitoring Team’s repeated requests to the District have also often gone unanswered or have been answered insufficiently. Below, Plaintiffs, again, detail their concerns regarding Consent Decree implementation. Because of the District’s failure to put forth its best efforts—as shown by administrative delays and lacks of results as catalogued in the Fourth Report—the District must now accelerate its efforts through 2009. A failure to do so promptly and aggressively would constitute substantial noncompliance, lack of good faith, and failure to deliver the quid pro quo of the parties’ agreement (Fourth Monitoring Report, 8/2/2007).

The report cites several court cases where school districts resisted compliance to discrimination consent decrees. Blakesdale was asked to perform “best efforts” requirements that is measured by their ability to fulfill specified obligation under the consent decree. One of the legal cases that was cited in the report that highlighted the use of “best efforts” requirements was *United States v. Board of Education of the City of Chicago*, 717 F.2d 378. 383 (7th Cir. 1983). The plaintiffs’ attorney in the report cited, “thus while the…defendants [Blakesdale School District] continually reiterate their “commitment,” they knowingly refuse to provide either the organizational structure or the administrative personnel necessary to carry out the Remedial Order. The result is systemic maladministration, a form of resistance quite different from “standing in the schoolhouse door;” but equally effective in impeding desegregation. 500 F. Supp. At 377.” The Monitoring Team concluded that “despite the promises that are encapsulated in the Collaboration Plan, the ultimate outlook for African American students by [school year] SY2008-09 remains dismal.”

The Monitoring Team reported that since 2002, Blakesdale delayed in adhering to court reporting and implementation requirements due to administrative turnover. “As the court well knows, improving the academic achievement of African American students [at Blakesdale]
school district is foundational goal of the Consent Decree. 188 F. Supp. 2d at 985. The Monitor’s 4th Report accurately portrays progress in this area as wholly insufficient, with projections for no additional progress in this critical area absent stringent acceleration of efforts by the District. 4th Monitoring Rpt., pp. 18, 23, 29.” Nationally, African American students disproportionately attend schools in large cities (Jones-Wilson, 1990; Karpinski, 2006) where their school districts struggle with funding issues, poorly trained staff, school violence, and de facto racial and social class segregation (Cooper & Jordan, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Orfield et al., 2004; Wimberly, 2002). Pedagogical decisions and the level of interaction with students and parents are guided by educators’ ideologies.

School boards have different views on what the possibilities are in terms of student learning and their beliefs about what the district is able to do to improve academic achievement. Mary Delagardelle (2008) states that the major difference between high achieving school districts and low achieving districts was that high achieving districts had more confidence of their students’ potential and they didn’t make excuses about what caused low achievement. She goes on to say that districts who were performing poorly were more willing to accept the status quo and the discourse of these districts reflected a belief that assumed the district was helpless to improve achievement because of excuses like poverty, lack of parental involvement, poor instruction, and the loss of “good students” to private schools.

Lillian Rubin (1972) reports that many small school districts across the country cannot offer a full range of advance level courses that are valued by teachers. Many educators and administrators believe according to Rubin that larger school districts have more respect for the teaching workforce as reflected by higher pay scales. Efforts to close the achievement gap has been unsuccessful in US schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings,
The achievement gap has normalized underachievement for students of color (Horsford, 2014). James Coleman (1966) reported that the responsibility for achievement lies upon the education system not the child. The gap in educational research on the achievement gap has failed to supply meaningful solutions to the problem. Race is central to understanding why academic achievement and disciplinary gaps persist for students of color in US public schools.

Blakesdale is a small urban school district of \((N=10,094)\) students located in the Midwest part of the United States. Over the past 20 years, school officials have grappled with the local African American community to provide racially fair and equitable public education services. Mr. Turner was one of the major leaders behind the social movement for racial justice equity-based school reform at Blakesdale. In 2006, Mr. Turner died from a chronic disease. The movement shifted significantly after his death leaving a void in the leadership ranks. Five years after his death, Blakesdale was released from the federal consent decree. African American students and their families are still dealing with the same forms of discrimination that they have always contended with at Blakesdale.

Provisions from the consent decree mandated that Blakesdale create committees to deal with issues of equity in education and disciplinary disparities in the district. The committees are required to have representation from the community and hold public meetings. One of the major dilemmas between policy and practice is that people and agencies who are placed in positions of leadership or problem solvers are the groups that the policies aim to correct (Cohen et al., 2018). The work of education policy is to provide goals and strategies for problem solving. Education policymaking and administration reveal the nexus of power and voice (Diem & Young, 2015). The disproportion of power is seen discursively by who is allowed to participate in decision-
making process and who those decisions benefit (Diem et al., 2014). Who loses due to a lack of representation in the decision-making process?

**Methodology**

This study is a critical ethnography that seeks to disrupt neutrality and assumptions projected into groups of people by revealing obscure operations of power and domination (Madison, 2012). The goal of my critical ethnography is to contribute to emancipatory discourses around social justice. Qualitative research methods in this study employed the use of in-depth interviews, archival data, observations and a critical discourse analyses of public educational documents such as student achievement data, and meeting minutes from the school district. Primary methods used in ethnographic fieldwork are participant observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis that helps the ethnographer see and make meaning of policy processes systemically (McCarty, 2011; Wolcott, 2008). Additional ethnographic methods that can be employed are sociolinguistic surveys and student achievement data to better comprehend practices that helps the researcher understand what is happening (McCarty, 2011; Stritkus & Wiese, 2006; Wolcott, 2008). District school officials at Blakesdale feel that there is no other school district comparable to them and the issues they face to inform school improvement reform. It was important that I used data from the district to speak to them about how their policies, practices, race talk are central to achieving better educational outcomes for all of their students. Soyini Madison (2005) states that critical ethnography is a reflexive ethnography whereby the ethnographer’s own positionality plays a vital role in contributing to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice.
Significance of the Study

Our country’s schools are more segregated now than they were in 1954 when the Supreme Court unanimously decided *Brown v. Board of Education*. Since *Brown*, many public school districts across the nation have and are dealing with court orders to desegregate schools and provide equitable educational opportunities to all students [e.g. *People Who Care v. Rockford Board of Education* (1999); *United States v. Board of the City of Chicago* (1983); *Spangler v. Pasadena City Board of Education* (1974)]. This dissertation is about race and racism and how a small urban school district in the Midwest resisted a federal consent decree that continues to result in the structural displacement of African American students in the school district. Specifically, this study examines how race talk dilemmas and structural intersectionality reveal the systemic operationalization of whiteness in education policy discursively. The findings in this work helps to center racism and education as a reflection of a longstanding history of racism in the United States. It is important that educational scholars who are interested in school improvement and issues of equity examine ways that educational laws are co-opted by school officials in order to maintain systems of social injustice.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I provide an introduction to the research study by describing how Blakesdale ended up under a federal consent decree. Examples are given to show how the school district resisted developing and implementing a plan to comply with federal law. The consequences of the district’s decision not to comply with the terms of the consent decree led to the structural displacement of some African American students.

In Chapter 2, I offer a literature review regarding school desegregation and its effects on academic and disciplinary achievement in public school districts regarding African American
students. I make connections with Blakesdale’s case to state and national trends regarding school desegregation efforts and the intended and unintended consequences of racial academic and disciplinary disparities.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the connection between methods and theories used in the study. The study is a critical ethnography that uses several qualitative methods to build a data set that helps inform the sociopolitical context of the research site and the people who have been and currently are participants of study.

Chapter 4 examines the racial public discourse regarding academic and disciplinary disparities of African American students at Blakesdale School District and how it is connected to historical racial foundations of segregation in Blakesdale County. The data in this chapter highlights how educational administrators have dealt with this issue in the district and how their interventions have failed to reduce structural displacement of African American students from their educational opportunities. I will discuss current pressures the District faces from the state as a result of these practices and why they disparities persist.

Chapter 5 examines the public discourse regarding the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs at Blakesdale. The data in this chapter highlights how educational administrators grapple with using special education programs as forms of discipline for African American students and the current citation and pressure from the state as a result of these practices.

In Chapter 6, I conclude the study with a reflexive summary of the findings that have happened over the course of the last twenty years at Blakesdale School District. I offer some recommendations for how Blakesdale and other schools districts in similar situations can make more progressive moves towards creating an equity-based school system.
School desegregation scholars note that interracial tolerance and a reduction in discriminatory behavior in public schools can occur if anti-racism programs are adopted to help improve race relations (Hawley et al, 1983; Suyemoto & Fox Tree, 2006). They go on to say that it is vital that school officials make known their support for better race relations to teachers, students, and parents. Interracial harmony is not easy to achieve in school districts undergoing desegregation plans. Often, the courts have to intervene and provide guidelines for the ways in which the school district and the local community must work together to achieve racial fairness and equity. Race and education policy in the United States over the last sixty years have shaped how academic achievement gaps and disciplinary disparities are constructed and maintained for African American students in public schooling.

The continuous existence of academic and disciplinary disparities in US-American public schooling is related to race, class, and gender issues. Public schools have been charged with reducing racial achievement—to help mend relations between descendants of African-American slaves and their former masters (Noguera & Wing, 2006). Lani Guinier (2004) used the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) to show how intersectionality was applied by using the judicial system to remedy equity issues in public schools in the United States. She explains why legal recourse alone is not enough to abolish equity and academic disparities in public schools, but that there must be community-based interventions that do not depend entirely on the government or law enforcement for assistance. Derrick Bell (1980) argues that the case was not centered on a social justice framework that could move beyond calculated special interests situated within a temporary alliance that preserved traditions in American history that treat Black civil rights as expendable. Other legal scholars believe that with the first Brown decision, Blacks won tokenism
instead of freedom that could be felt by Blacks across socioeconomic lines. (Guinier, 2004; Harris, 1993; Bell, 1980) They contend that the Black community was fractured post-Brown. However, whether students of color in public school are receiving quality and equitable educational opportunities is still contested. The intersectional approach of Brown v. Board of Education is a seminal example of how marginalized communities have fought for their rights in the courts to advance educational opportunities for themselves and others.

What is community? In a Post-Brown Era, community is not situated along racial lines. Anyone who advocates for student achievement outside or inside of schools make up a community of supporters for equity, equality and academic excellence for all pupils. In order to tackle these issues effectively, a diverse coalition of citizens are needed to abolish systems of oppression in public schooling. Everyone has something to lose by preserving inequalities in public spaces that allow for public goods to become privatized. A popular idea about why the achievement and disciplinary disparities persist among minority groups is based on class and not race because these students had a low socioeconomic status (Gordon et al., 2000; Maran, 2000; Portes, 2005). The poverty argument as the causal effect of low achievement and disciplinary issues is problematic.

**Rethinking School Desegregation in a Post-Brown Era**

**National Race Talk Dilemmas and the Antibusing Movement**

Historian Matthew Delmont (2016) says the reason that busing for school desegregation did not succeed to desegregate public schools more sufficiently was because school officials, courts, politicians, and news media outlets respected the aspirations of white parent over the rights of Black students. School busing began as a privilege to white students before school integration efforts occurred. Black students who lived outside of area where public transportation
was available had to walk long distances to school. Delmont adds that involuntary busing schemes to desegregate schools were resisted by white parents and politicians by using terms like “busing” and “neighborhood schools” to create a rhetorical strategy that allowed them to support segregated white schools and neighborhoods without using explicitly racist language. This form of race talk helped to conceal opposition to busing as something other than a refusal of school desegregation and the histories of racial discrimination and necessity for legal desegregation orders.

Arthur Siddon (1981) reported in the *Chicago Tribune* that busing was the cause for segregation. He interviewed Rep. James Collins (D., Texas) who told the House Judiciary subcommittee that his Dallas school district was more segregated now than in 1968. Collins was alarmed by the white flight because the racial composition of the school district moved from 38.8% minority in 1968 to 80% due to busing. White students are now the minority in his public school district. White flight caused a power shift in access to public schooling in Dallas that was once predominately white. Collins stated specifically that the problem was white flight while he noted that other cities have experienced the same fate such as Chicago who went from 62.3% minority enrollment in 1968 to 75.3% in 1977. Detroit went from 60.7% to 81.4% while New Orleans went from 68.7% to 83.5% minority enrollment in their public school districts. Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans all had enrollment rates of more than 50% minority student enrollment in their public school districts and have historically been known to have a significantly large population of Blacks living in those cities. Collins says, “Americans in record numbers are demanding an end to forced busing and a return to the neighborhood school.” Collins idea of who “Americans” are and which “Americans” want to end involuntary busing are white people.
His notion of who Americans are do not include people who are nonwhite. Neighborhood schools are located in racially identifiable segregated communities.

John Kass (1993) reported in the Chicago Tribune that school leaders were working towards efforts to end involuntary busing. Kass covered a school board meeting in Chicago where a heated debate took place over an involuntary busing plan that was mandated by an active 1982 federal consent decree to integrate Chicago public schools. The vice president of Chicago Board of Education stated, “we can [integrate Chicago public schools through] neighborhood schools. Maybe we can renegotiate. We can ask the [U.S.] Justice Department to allow us to use the money for other kids. The [desegregation] concept was for children who were educationally deprived. We can’t desegregate it anymore.” Chicago public school officials report that 410,000 students were enrolled in the district at that time with a racial breakdown showing 11.6% of students were white, 56.2% were Black, and 29% Hispanic.

Alderman Patrick O’Connor (40th district) noted that the consent decree was supposed to stop racial segregation in the schools. He said, “We already know that the consent decree is not something we could just get rid of and, at this point, we’re not saying that that’s what we want.” Vice president Cruz said, neighborhood schools would be strengthened [by ending involuntary busing], which he said is what parents want.” The master narrative around neighborhood schools in this discussion is that white parents would like to see the end of the involuntary busing plan because students of color have become the majority of students enrolled in Chicago public schools. An African American Alderman John Steele (6th district) chimed in supporting Cruz’s point saying, “There are not enough whites in the system to have an effective busing program, so something has to be modified.” Kass noted that there was a public concern about neighborhood
schools as well as the issue of school vouchers. Both advocates and opponents of school
vouchers agreed that they felt that a school voucher program “would kill public schools.”

Education writer for the Chicago Tribune V. Dion Haynes (1995) provides an overview
of how Chicago public school district has dealt with operating under a federal consent decree
that was the result of a lawsuit filed by the U.S. Justice Department in 1980. Haynes writes,
“School officials agreed to draw minority and white students to magnet schools; integrate the
faculty systemwide; and upgrade curriculums for minority students at neighborhood schools
where desegregation was not possible.” Haynes makes an important point here that
desegregation is not possible in neighborhood schools. The public outcry from white school
officials, politicians, and parents to stop mandatory busing and look to neighborhood schools to
solve school segregation issues is because they are aware that neighborhood schools reside in
racially segregated communities. Residential segregation is the result of racist local and federal
policies where redlining and federal bank lending practices segregate Black from whites
(Blaisdell, 2016; Chang & Smith, 2008; Mandell, 2008).

Cheryl Harris (1993) explains that these policies are grounded in the idea that whiteness
functions as a form of property that allow whites the ability to use and enjoy access to resources
that they deny to others. The values of people of color who live in homogenous neighborhoods
are judged from the perspective of whites with more privilege than them. In neighborhoods
where whites do not live, white values are the standards for the social and material worth of
those neighborhoods. Haynes reported that like students, teachers wanted to teach in schools in
their own neighborhoods. Haynes says, “because of segregated housing patterns in Chicago,
white teachers tend to apply for jobs near their homes, at schools in predominately white
neighborhoods. And minority teachers do the same thing, throwing the schools’ racial mix out of
balance. As a result, some principals are forced to turn away qualified candidates because they are of the wrong race.”

Haynes believes that desegregation efforts have accomplished very little in Chicago. She says that “test scores are at their lowest levels, particularly among minority students. Beyond the 36 magnet schools, the district is as segregated as ever. Haynes says there are “strong critics of any attempt to dismantle the desegregation order. Without it, said James Compton, executive director of the Chicago Urban League, the school system would return to the days of unchecked racial isolation.” William Bradford Reynolds was the assistant attorney general for civil rights under Ronald Reagan’s administration who reported to Rowley Storer at the Chicago Tribune (1981) that forced busing failed as means to integrate schools. Reynolds “citing Chicago educator Marva Collins as an example, he said she has “in her own quiet and very effective way taught us all that Black children do not need to attend school with white children in any particular preconceived ratio in order to learn.”

Reynolds made statements that were received as definitive on federal school policy, “the government enthusiastically supports the educational part of the Chicago Board of Education’s desegregation plan.” He mentioned in this speech that the board’s efforts to enhance educational quality in the desegregation plan has “our enthusiastic approval.” However, the part of the plan he took issue with was the student reassignment plan that required mandatory busing. “Forced busing has, in the final analysis, largely failed in two major respects. It has failed to gain needed public acceptance and it has failed to translate into enhanced educational achievement. Blind allegiance to an experiment that has not withstood the test of experience obviously makes little sense.” Reynolds said that in future cases where the Justice Department finds de jure segregation it “will seek a desegregation remedy that does not depend on court-ordered busing.” Zeus
Leonardo (2004) explains that white supremacy involves actions and policies that whites enact to maintain dominance and privilege associated with whiteness. Racial spaces in the school contexts are places where the rights of marginalized students are subjected to a racialized hierarchy that privileges whites only. Reynolds and others who were against involuntary busing plans opposed them because it disadvantaged white students and their families.

*White Backlash and Structural Issues of Race, Class, and Gender*

Matthew Delmont asserts that the contention over busing was not about policy. He says James Coleman and United States Civil Rights Commission’s vice chairman Stephen Horn voiced concerns in 1979 about the federal government’s lack of an institutional program of analysis that could help policymakers with determining the intended and unintended consequences of desegregation. Horn and Coleman criticized the research that was being done for policymakers to use to inform their decisions. During that time politicians and parents relied on studies from policy analysts such as Thomas Pettigrew and Gary Orfield to support their opinions on busing. Their work was not widely accessible to the public nor did it examine the visceral aspects of media coverage against mandated busing plans. In the early days of school desegregation, federal consent decrees were viewed as a form of judicial activism that called into question the role of the court in reform of public institutions (Rebell, 2009). Literature on American exceptionalism stress that Americans define equality in terms of opportunity not equality of economic conditions (Melnick, 2009). In an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1995 titled “Americans rethink desegregation,” Ruth Batson, an ex-NAACP activist said, “I have to say that busing was worth it…We had schools with no libraries, schools in dilapidated condition, schools with inadequate numbers of teachers, and a school administration with no Blacks in key positions.”
Lillian Rubin (1972) outlines several reasons for white backlash to desegregation in California. She explains that both liberals and conservatives hold racist beliefs. However, liberal integrationists admit that America is a racist society and whites have discriminated unfairly against Blacks for centuries while conservative anti-integrationists do not. In her study, Rubin notes that without evidence, white integrationists feared that the presence of Black children in the classroom with whites would decrease the quality of education offered to white students. Most of these parents were from upper middle-class backgrounds who did not want to take a chance on their children’s educational opportunities becoming limited for the sake of integration. Conservative anti-integrationists did not want to acknowledge that white society had wronged Black people in any way. Rubin observes in her study that the very people who “mistreat the English language” (p. 70) are most likely to criticize dialects of Blacks. When one parent argued, “[that] he ought to be free to send his children to any school he chose, just so long as “it’s credentiated” and another said, “I always have spoke my mind,” (p. 71). Both white parents were unaware that there were issues with their use of the English language. White parents were afraid that integration would led to their children being subjected to academic deprivation similar to what Black students had been subjected to before the Brown decision.

In 2007, the ruling by the Supreme Court in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District limited the ability of local school districts to invoke voluntary desegregation plans (Rebell, 2009). The court in this case used the Brown case as the basis for restricting equal educational opportunities for African American students that Brown sought to provide them. One of the most provocative sites where the nexus of school desegregation and community affects are evidence is in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On March 24, 2010, a report by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel offered a dismal outlook on public schools from high truancy and
dropout rates to extremely low test scores, especially for African American students (Miner, 2013). A national recession hit the rust belt states where in Wisconsin, Black unemployment rates were soaring. Approximately 53.3% of working-age Black men in Milwaukee were not working in 2009 and in 2010 the unemployment rate for Black men rose to 55.3% which was the highest unemployment rate ever report in the city (Miner, 2013; Levine, 2012). In 1970, the employment rate for Black males in Milwaukee was 85%, yet no one could predict that the city would become a symbol for unemployment decline and racial disparity (Miner, 2013; Levine, 2011). Milwaukee’s educational system adopted the school voucher model which is the largest and oldest voucher program in the nation which has funneled more than $1 billion of public funding into private and religious schools since 1990 (Miner, 2013).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Milwaukee was still committed to the idea of public schooling. Some proponents for school privatization and voucher programs were present. However, in 1988, Milwaukee school board unanimously voted for Dr. Robert Peterkin, an African American superintendent to lead the school district into change. Peterkin was an outsider and neutral voice in the school district. Milwaukee public schools along with city and county government jobs were the source of employment for the middle-class African American community (Dahlk, 2010). By the time Peterkin began his appointment as superintendent, whites had already left for the suburbs, the Black community was dealing with issues of unemployment and poverty, and the consequences of the AIDS and crack cocaine crisis (De Parle, 2005). The Peterkin Era was remembered as a model of public schooling trying to do things right. The school board had good relations with the local administration, the central office valued teachers as necessary participant to educational reform, a multicultural curricula was developed and used, and the country’s first Waldorf School was founded in 1991 (Miner, 2013). The media in
Milwaukee did not highlight these achievements, instead they chose to spin rhetoric that condemned public schools as incapable of reform.

Ideas of desegregation during Peterkin’s tenure with Milwaukee school district were that desegregation was not just about racial balance in the school buildings, but a transformative and racially inclusive curricula. It was startling that the school board was supportive of multicultural education initiative because just 15 years earlier they were against efforts to desegregate. In November of 1990, Peterkin shocked the school district by announcing he planned to resign his position and take a job at Harvard University. Peterkin’s departure was a hard blow to the work he spearheaded toward progressive change (Milwaukee Journal, 11/21/1990). Conservative policy analysts like Lynne Cheney, Dick Cheney’s wife opposed multicultural education. Six year before her husband became vice president of the United States in the George W. Bush administration, she wrote an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal (1994) attacking projected U.S. History curriculum changes on the basis that it focused too much attention on political embarrassments like the work of the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism.

She wrote a follow up opinion editorial in the Wall Street Journal in 2015 where she attacked changes made by the College Board to the Advance Placement (AP) U.S. History exam stating, “On the multiple-choice part of the sample exam, there are 18 sections, and eight of them take up the oppression of women, blacks and immigrants. Knowing about the experiences of these groups is important—but truth requires that accomplishment be recognized as well as oppression, and the exam doesn’t have questions on subjects such as the transforming leadership of Martin Luther King Jr.” She continued her critique by saying, “The heroic acts of the men who landed on Omaha Beach and lifted the flag on Iwo Jima are ignored. The wartime experiences that the new framework prefers are those raising “questions about American values,”
such as “the internment of Japanese Americans, challenges to civil liberties, debates over race and segregation, and the decision to drop the atomic bomb.” Similar sentiments that Lynne Cheney expressed in her opposition to a more multicultural education framework was expressed by the public in 1989 when the New York City Central Board of Education developed a guide called *Children of the Rainbow* that taught respect for diversity of families such as parents who were members of the LGBT community (Karp, 1993).

Conservative middle-class whites such as Mary Cummins who was a board member of school Board #24 in New York was a staunch opponent of *Children of the Rainbow* and HIV/AIDS curricula. Cummins receive legal assistance from Catholic Church leaders such as Cardinal John O’Connor to oppose multicultural education in her district. She said, “We will not accept two people of the same sex engaged in deviant sex practices as family,” (Furutani, 1996). The *Wall Street Journal* entered the debate to criticize public schools and argue that *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum “all adds up to more fuel for the burgeoning school-choice movement,” (Furutani, 1996). This debate sent a national message to school superintendents nationwide to be careful when dealing with issues of tolerance and prejudice in the school curriculum. Adversaries of school desegregation has changed the way they talk about the outcomes of desegregation between Black and white students. Although racial achievement gaps were the most circumscribed at the apex of school integration, many students who ride a school bus attend segregated schools that are racial and academically imbalanced. “Busing ended because of a combination of white protest, media that overemphasized resistance, and the lack of systemic collection to judge the impact of desegregation. Busing did not fail, the nation’s resolve and commitment to equal and excellent desegregated schools did,” (Theoharis, 2015).
School Desegregation and the Making of the Achievement Gap

Integration ideology during the Civil Rights movement was driven by the idea that racism could end when Blacks were thoroughly interspersed in society (Bell, 1980). Opponents to school integration resist policies that would change the current public school structure that heavily advantage white students over all others. Integrationists believe that racial balance in public schools would also provide an even distribution of resources that white students received over all other students which was one of the benefits the Brown case hoped to achieve. Legal scholar Charles Lawrence (1980) says the purpose of school segregation is to subordinate Blacks in society by providing them with inadequate resources and teaching them feel inferior to whites. He posits that all whites benefit from segregation policies that reduce the educational opportunity to Black students. He asserts that white school officials are complicit in maintaining segregation systemically through school board policies. Lawrence believes that the Brown decision ushered in a post racial way of thinking about race in America both within the legal system and society. This view of the Brown decision is a notion of equal educational opportunities. However, there is no legal recognized right or ethical claim that US citizens have to an education opportunity (Freeman, 1980). Desegregation of schools is a narrow way of addressing segregation as an institution. Instead, an intentional dismantling of institutional segregation must occur (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Lawrence, 1980).

Theresa Perry (2003) asserts that the predicament of the achievement gap is rooted racist ideologies that place African Americans as inferior to whites. She believes that these ideologies are reproduced by mass media who depict Black people as deviant and an inferior caste-like population. Perry contends that examinations of the Black—white achievement gap does not position the cause of the race-based notion of an achievement gap within a structural analysis of
systemic racism intentionally imposed on African American students. Perry claims that the breakdown of the institution of the Black family is to blame for low academic achievement of Black students. Her claim is problematic in that her analysis reflects the general tenets of segregation manifested in her interpretation of African American families. Her misinterpretation of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1970) habitus or social capital theory reads like the findings out of the Moynihan Report which was instrumental in inserting deficit thinking about African American families in public policy discourses (Bobo & Charles, 2009). African American parents strongly support educational opportunities for their children because they believe that it is the only pathway to social and economic mobility (Honig, 1987; Irvine, 1990). The Brown case is an example of one of many measures Black families have taken in the United States to provide access to quality educational opportunities to their children.

The racial achievement gap is nationally acknowledged as an educational challenge confronting U.S. public schools (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is mainly the reason for the attention because NCLB compares test scores by racial categories whereby white students’ achievement is measured against students of color. The gap between the test scores of white and Black students is known as the achievement gap (Horsford, 2017; Span & Rivers, 2012). The term Black-white achievement gap is focused mainly upon achievement between two racial groups while omitting the struggles of other racial and ethnic groups in schools. The demographic makeup of the public school in the US is diverse and any national education policies targeted at improving education achievement should be inclusive of all students (Howard, 2010). Efforts to close the achievement gap has been unsuccessful in U.S. schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Payne, 2008). The achievement gap has normalized underachievement for students of color (Horsford, 2014). James
Coleman (1966) reported that the responsibility for achievement lies upon the education system not the child. The gap in educational research on the achievement gap has failed to supply meaningful solutions to the problem. Race is central to understanding why academic achievement and disciplinary gaps persist for students of color in US public schools.

The Coleman Report and Jencks et al are influential studies of school effects that state academic achievement is predicated upon socioeconomic status. Students from low-income families are given a low chance for increased academic gains in these studies. Ronald Edmonds (1980) argues that students’ socioeconomic backgrounds are the determinant for academic performance but the school’s response to the socioeconomic status of students. He believes that all children can be educated and that the behavior of the school is critical in determining the quality of educational outcomes. The belief that low socioeconomic status is a determinant for low academic achievement absolves educators of their professional duties to teach effectively. Quality education does not happen solely because schools are racially balanced. Race and class are markers for teachers to form generalizations about students’ academic ability and the expectations or lack of they will have for those students. Race is an important factor that determines teacher expectations of students (Baron et al., 1985; Irvine, 1990). Educational research is steeped in mainstream narratives about the need to close the achievement gap, reform failing urban schools and rescue low achieving students from low-income backgrounds. Education reforms over the last thirty years reflect support for increased involvement by the federal government in education for the sake of national interest while shifting the analysis from a historical view of equity that was prevalent during the mid-1950s and 1960s towards a standards-based approach for achieving academic excellence and accountability that began in the 1980s until present (Horsford, 2014). The standards-based approach to education reform is a
corporate reform model that seeks to narrow the achievement gap by supporting a free market system of education.

In 1981, the U.S. Secretary of Education under the Reagan administration, Terrel H. Bell established the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) to examine the quality of education in U.S. public schools and provide recommendations for improving schools within 18 months (Bell, 1988; NCEE, 1983). The report called *A Nation at Risk* provided the framework for the modern high-stakes standardize testing movement. Three years after the report was published, 26 states had implemented education reforms based on standardized testing (Au, 2013). Standardize testing in the U.S. was rooted in the origins of IQ testing and scientific racism. Scientific racism posits that intellectual abilities are genetic and that certain races or ethnic groups are biological inferior to whites (Au, 2013; Selden, 1999). Standardized testing was supposed to be an objective way to measure merit and achievement that would eliminate any race and class privilege biases embedded in one’s genetic makeup (Sacks, 1999). However, there is a body of literature that show how determinants outside of the education environment such as food insecurity and limited access to healthcare have an overwhelming negative effect on academic achievement (Berliner, 2009). *A Nation at Risk* increased attention on academic standard in U.S. public schools. Over the past thirty years, African American and Latino students have made the most significant gain in academic achievement on standardized tests, even more than white students (Anderson, 2004). An equitable model of education for all is not the goal of the U.S. education system because that would eradicate race and class stratification and render everyone equal. There is a long history of elite groups resisting this kind of progressive and inclusive universal education reform because it challenges the status and privileges of the elite (Au, 2005; Oakes et al., 1998; Popham, 2001).
President Reagan had made a campaign promise to abolish the U.S. Department of Education. Education policies like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and Title I were implemented during the Civil Rights Era and were centered on an equity to approach for federally funding schools. During the 1980s, the transition from equity-based policies to excellence-based education reforms began. Federal education policies were based on high-stakes testing results. The next 20 years saw the operationalization of excellence-based aims through President Bill Clinton’s 1994 Goals 2000: Educate America Act, President George W. Bush’s NCLB of 2001, and President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top of 2011 (Cross, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Horsford, 2014; McGuinn, 2012; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Welner & Burris, 2014; Welner & Weitzmann, 2005). Education reforms over the last thirty years, believes that traditional modes of teaching and learning is no longer acceptable to address the challenges of public schooling. These reforms impose a remarkable amount of responsibility for restructuring the local school to create conditions where these reforms can be administered (Cooper & Jordan, 2009; Klecker & Loadman, 1999; Petrovich, 2005; Slavin & Fashola, 1998).

Accountability policies illustrates the struggle of how authority shifts from one level of government to another. By 2001, states were providing on average 51.4% of spending for K-12 public education (McDermott, 2007). Marguerite Clarke (2007) says that policies similar to NCLB were less likely to close the achievement gap, but rather expand it. She adds that no state has been exceptionally effective at closing the Black-white achievement gap which calls into question the validity of using the standards-based reform model for attaining academic excellence in U.S. education.

Deficit attitudes towards students of color in public schools can lead to gaps on standardized tests and school report cards due to disparities in academic knowledge and skill
Teachers and school officials’ beliefs about their students matter for curtailing achievement gaps. Tracking is a means of segregating students along racial lines and allocating the best educational opportunities to whites over Blacks (Mickelson, 2005).

The poverty-based paradigm to the achievement gap is more palatable to explain academic and disciplinary disparities rather than racial discrimination as the root cause of the gaps. The national poverty-based rationale for increasing wealth and income gaps in the US supports prevailing deficit ideologies about poor people and the achievement gap (Gorski, 2012). Educational research regarding why the achievement gap for African American students remain is rooted in a deficit-view that says growing up African American negatively affects their academic achievement (Cooper & Jordan, 2009). It is important to examine the use of deficit ideology in public schooling because to ignore it can hinder the ability for the formation of strategies that can thwart disparities that require students to deal with inequities that should not be present in public education.

Mayor Bill de Blasio told the New York Times that he proposed the elimination of “specialized high school exams in favor of a system based on class rank and test scores that would admit more Black and Hispanic students [and] have called on his administration to address segregation and uneven academic performance in middle schools,” (Shapiro, 2018). Many debates are happening about how to narrow the Black-white achievement gap. Some advocates say that forcing more financial support to school with a large population of poor kids will work. Others argue that integration is the best approach to solve the problem. “Although a lot of districts talk about racial integration at the local level, I actually think that, at the state and national level, race-mixing was already an antiquated issue, said Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. At the state and national level, the discussion has to do with
money and the achievement gap,” (Lewin & Herszenhorn, *The New York Times* 2007). Education reformers have used judicial activism as a way to stake their claim under the law for an educational opportunity. National standardized test results are making that more possible although the Black-white achievement gap is a divisive way to approach issues of educational equity.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS & THEORIES

Structural Intersectionality

What is intersectionality? What does it do? In her address to the United Nations, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2000) states that intersectionality is a provisional framework that encompasses two forms: 1) structural intersectionality shows how policies intersect with foundational structures of inequality to create compounded injury for vulnerable victims; and 2) political intersectionality refers particularly to women who are members of marginalized groups organized in different ways to challenge oppressive conditions. Structural intersectionality maps the corporeal consequences of systems of oppression while political intersectionality describes the strategies used to fight against those systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 2014). Intersectionality is the study of how social and structural dimensions of inequality shape social life (Grzanka, 2014). Intersectionality is not theory centered on identities or identity politics, but a sociological concept that is concerned with providing a structural analysis and critique of how social inequalities are produced and maintained (Cho et al., 2013; Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 2000; Dill et al., 2001). The politics around identities are outcomes of historically established institutionalized order of domination and violence (Grzanka, 2014). A critical intersectional approach examines structures of inequality with a relational critique that helps us develop a decolonial knowledge about marginalized social groups and about the operations of power and privilege (Dill & Kohlman, 2011).

*The Nexus between Intersectionality and Race Talk Dilemmas*

Intersectionality places the experiences of marginalized groups at the center of analysis which allows researchers to generate knowledge about the causal effects of sociopolitical systems of oppression and privilege had on disadvantaged populations within an institution.
(Choo & Ferree, 2010; Collins, 1989) Race talk is a way in which we perceive and talk about race and how language is performed in public (Sue, 2015). Race talk dilemmas are discursive ways in which issues of race, class, and gender are revealed. Race talk is an intersectional discursive framework that provides a lens to investigate the methods used to single out certain groups for discriminatory treatment on the basis of race, racism and other forms of oppression. The race talk among school officials in my research illustrates the effects of segregation on the formation of racist ideology of residents in Blakesdale County. Residents who live in segregated towns are more racist and discriminate toward African Americans, members of the LGBTQ community, and other marginalized groups (Loewen, 2006). Race talk is intersectional because not only does it provide an intellectual examination of racial issues and dilemmas that helps educational stakeholders perceive and address their own racial practices with clarity (Pollock, 2006), it links the origin of the beliefs and practices to the system(s) that produced it. Mica Pollock (2006) observes that race talk is not just talk but a discursive lens that allows us to see how we negotiate with racial inequality and the consequences of those negotiations to harm the most vulnerable students in our public education system.

*Systems of Oppression—The Law*

The law is a discursive arena where social norms are created and maintained; and where subject and identities are formed and transformed, and where the social contract is both supported and resisted (Grzanka, 2014). Legal structures are an example of the kinds of structures that intersectional teaching, research, and activism target (2014; p. 1). The law can be understood as a system of oppression in which structural intersectionality demonstrates the ways in which oppressed social groups resist their oppression (Crenshaw, 2000). The law marks how its historical dimensions are entangled with institutions and stakeholders who have an investment
in exploiting difference and the manufacturing of it (Reddy, 2005). Intersectional research examines how major current and historical events exhibit systemic patterns of discrimination, exploitation, privilege, and deprivation such as unfair sentencing practices (Farrell et al., 2010); incarceration and schools (Meiners, 2007); and antidiscrimination law (Crenshaw, 1989) are created and governed by systemic forces create structures of inequality. School and residential segregation are patterns of systemic oppression that use illegal policies and practices to displace, dominant, and discrimination against people of color. A structural analysis of social structures helps us understand what the problems are and how might change occur (Apple, 1993). The U.S. Supreme Court in 1917 in the case of Buchanan v. Warley deemed ordinances that excluded African Americans from living in segregated communities in Louisville, KY (Loewen, 2006). Dorothy Newman (1978) posits that residential separations relies on formal and informal policies and practices that are carefully followed that no legislation has been able to eradicate. Brown v. Board of Education was a landmark decision that provided an actual legal strategy for not only integrating public schools in the United States, but segregated communities as well. Structural intersectionality attempts to capture the structural and material consequences of the interactions between multiple systems of subordination and address the ways the specific policies and practices create inequalities (Crenshaw, 2014).

The debate over the meaning of Intersectionality

Intersectionality is about an examination of power and systemic forms of oppression. However, debates have ensued about whether intersectionality is about exploring categories of identities or about the structures of inequality that create them (Cho et al., 2013). Some intersectional scholars whose scholarship is centered on interrogating systems of oppression say that intersectionality should not be preoccupied with identity or subjectivity as the focal point
(Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 2000; Dill et al., 2001; Ferguson, 2012; Grzanka, 2014). These scholars contend that an over emphasis on the role of agency, choice, and resilience will attribute the response of the subjects rather than examining the social forces that reduce opportunities and create socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviors of interaction. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) suggests the focus on identity narratives reveal a shift in U.S. American society’s thought from examining structural analyses of social problems such as the role of schools, prisons, workplace practices that produce poverty, and the increasing denial of institutional responses to social inequalities and the lack of governmental social policies to remedy these social problems. It is important to examine how institutions structure the political and social interpretations of problems through the policy stances they choose to take to being about solutions to problems (Whiteman et al., 2017; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012). Intersectionality can be an analytic or mode of inquiry for thinking about the way we explore identity politics (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Patrick Grzanka (2014) asserts that by reducing intersectionality to a study of identity politics is the primary way intersectionality has been co-opted. During the 1990s and 1990s, social science disciplines in the academy were preoccupied with reductive debates about structure versus agency, macro versus micro, and qualitative versus quantitative research methods (Grzanka, 2014). Qualitative methods have become the dominant mode of intersectionality research mainly because it is a more skillful way to capture the social complexities and personal subjectivities than quantitative methods (Dill et al., 2007).

Methodology Section

Research Questions

1. In what ways did school officials’ public discourse about student achievement and disciplinary disparities suggest the need for changes in the school culture and building equity in Blakesdale school district?
2. What systems of meaning about low-income and minority students are revealed through public discourses at school and district public meetings?

3. How did the race talk of school officials preserve disparate disciplinary and academic practices at Blakesdale?

**Critical Ethnography**

*Tracing the history of critical ethnography*

Soyini Madison (2012) proposes that the field of ethnography in the United States was primarily influenced by British anthropologists from the 19th century and the Chicago School from the 1960s. Anthropologists during the mid-19th century relied on questionnaires as the central method for collecting data. The questionnaires were sent to offices of colonial administrators where ethnologists were assigned to interpret them (Davis, 1999). James Frazer’s book *The Golden Bough* (1990) is an example of work from this era (Madison, 2012). By the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, ethnologists began doing participants observational fieldwork. Bronislaw Malinowski from the United Kingdom (UK) and Franz Boas from the United States are cited by anthropologists as being pioneer ethnologists (Davis, 1999). British social anthropologists were interested in studying the links between individual cultural forms and societal social structures (1999, p. 69). A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s (1958) concept of structural functionalism began to gain influence in American anthropology. Structural functionalism explores social structure determinants and their interconnections within their own systems. It does not consider external forces, instead the focus is on maintenance of the structure that surmises that human conduct is guided by the structures that produce their culture and behavior. Research from the Department of Social Science and Anthropology at the University of Chicago in the 1920s began to place an emphasis on pragmatism and aspects of symbolic interactionism. Jim Thomas (1993) posits that the Chicago School’s work was foundational for
advancing a dynamic program of interpretive ethnography. Positivism and post-positivism notions became central to thinking about ethnography research methodology.

According to Norman Denzin (2001) positivists believe that there is truth that can be objectively interpreted, the researcher as a subject cannot be a part of any representation of the subject under inquiry, and the subjects or objects under research must be absolved from universal generalizations. Post-positivism, also known as the “new ethnography,” rejects the tenets of positivism. Post-positivism is concerned with regarding the thoughts of human experience, local knowledge and linguistic expressions as valuable analytical frameworks (Denzin, 2001). The historical genealogy of critical ethnography is rooted in whiteness that produces forms of intellectual colonialism whereby valuable subaltern analysts are subjugated and erased (Harrison, 1995). One of these subaltern analysts who has contributed to the development of rigorous methods and methodology insight is W.E.B. Du Bois and the scholars of the Atlanta School of Sociology. Du Bois was doing rigorous mixed methods research long before it was an accepted practice in the academy in America. The Chicago school is credited with being the first school of empirical sociology in the United States. However, the Atlanta School of Sociology (at Atlanta University) was doing empirical sociology more than two decades before the Chicago school was established (Morris, 2015). One of the most significant research studies that Du Bois conducted was to debunk arguments that Blacks were biologically and culturally inferior to whites. For white intelligentsia of the time such as Boas and Malinowski, genetics and cultures were determinants for justifying their claims rather than examining the social conditions that produced inequalities. Systemic empirical research should be the basis for social science analysis. The goal is to produce research that is not harmful. Du Bois believed that interacting with people within the research setting was essential for social science research. He did not
believe that you could create sufficient findings by theorizing about human interactions from an office. He did not believe in racial inferior/superior binaries. There were reasons for suppressing his scholarship by white sociologists because his work showed that their theories about Black people’s inferiority was not supported. The purpose of research is to establish community studies and theoretical formulations based on empirical methodology (2015, p. 4). Methods are not isolated or static actions, but are dependent upon the researcher’s scene of inquiry, purpose, research questions, and theories that inform the work (Murillo, 2004).

A critical ethnographer disrupts neutrality and assumptions projected onto groups of people by revealing obscure operations of power and domination (Madison, 2012). The goal of my critical ethnography is to contribute to emancipatory discourses around social justice in public education systems in the United States. Critical ethnography is an ethnography with a political purpose (Thomas, 1993). My work seeks to give broader meaning to operations of human conditions in school settings and contribute to practices of educational equity and justice for all students in small rural and urban public schools. Studying the connection between language and power through critical social theory, and the analysis of written texts requires looking at multiple levels of social contexts and how they are aligned with social justice (Johnson, 2011). This critical ethnography focuses on the complex relationship between the U.S. public education system and African American’s desire to obtain educational opportunity within a small urban school district.

**Site Location and Description**

Blakesdale school district is located in a small urban town in Illinois that shares close proximity to a large research university. It is a small urban school with a total enrollment of (N=10,095) students from K-12 levels. The racial history of Blakesdale is complicated by its
close proximity to several active sundown towns. Sundown towns are any organized jurisdiction that use illegal formal policy and ordinance as well as violent force for decades to keep African Americans and other racially marginalized groups from living in towns designated for “all-white” purpose (Loewen, 2006). Sundown towns are a violent mode of forced residential segregation that used illegal ordinances that prohibited African Americans from working in those towns after dark or from owning or renting property in sundown towns. James Loewen (2006) estimates that Illinois has approximately 472 towns that were sundown towns. The sundown towns that surround Blakesdale are still active and their racial demographics are primarily white. Sundown town movement was created to maintain segregation and can illuminate issues of race relations in the areas where they are located, but also informs race relations in the United States (2006, p. 16). Initially, I wanted to conduct my dissertation research around rural education. However, because the towns that I was interested in were still active sundown towns it would not have been safe for me to conduct research in these towns.

African Americans have been particularly targeted for exclusion because historically the relationship between whites and African Americans was as master and slave. John Ogbu (1978) asserts that European Americans have systemically subjugated three groups: Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans by taking the land of the first two and the labor of the third. European Americans have systemically classified these groups as inferior through white racism and segregation. Fear surrounding the school desegregation movement led to an increase in sundown towns (Loewen, 2006). Many whites were unable to reconcile with the equality implied by public schooling and the tenets of total exclusion. Segregation encompassed the notion that African Americans were inferior to white and should not have equal social contact with whites. The Brown v. Board of Education decision was an important step towards
ending segregation in all aspects of public life (2006, p.171). Sociologist Matthew Desmond (2016) makes major connection between property ownership and access to certain rights and liberties as citizens in the United States. The private housing market is central to facilitating these social transaction for poor people. The ideologies of white poor people regarding poverty and class compared to people of color is astounding. Desmond presents a portrait of how poor whites compared their impoverished situation to poor people of color. The location of where they lived mattered. Geographical locations carry identities just as people do. Two of Desmond’s participants, Ned and Pam felt that living in a motel would be better than living in a ghetto where they may have Black neighbors. Ghettos are slum areas occupied by the poor. Pam and Ned assigned the descriptive of ghettos to Black people as an innate racial marker of their character and identity. The trailer park where they lived for a short term could be considered a ghetto, but this instance showed the contrast of between how specific geographical locations receive their social constructed status. Race and poverty intersects often and becomes difficult to interpret outside of stereotypes that have been consciously and subconsciously accepted at large. James Loewen (2006) refer to the social and racial isolation of sundown towns as white ghettos in which he seeks to explore the pathological behavior of the residents in those towns.

**Role of the Researcher**

My positionality as a researcher is as an activist-scholar which Michelle Fine (1991) describe as an ethnographer whose position is to disturb hegemonic practices and advocate for marginalized categories by exposing injustices in spaces where disadvantaged people are located while offering alternatives. My interest in small rural and urban schools stem from my own upbringing and education in public schools in the rural Southeastern part of the United States. My personal interests and experiences inform why I chose to this research project. However, I do
not believe that the analysis of my findings are limited by those experiences or is diminished by the historical time I am living in. This study encompasses the histories of African Americans who have suffered and fought systemic oppression not only in the quest to become educated in formal educational settings, but to be considered citizens of the human race.

I began school during the early 1980s through the mid-1990s. My parents had been among the first group of Black students to integrate the local high school. There were very few teachers of color in the school system I attended. My hometown is a small farming area with several factories that employed the majority of the people in town. We had two types of schools county schools and city schools. Students who lived outside of the city were sent to county schools and those who lived closer to the city were sent to the city schools. I attended the county schools because we lived on a farm. There were very few teachers of color who taught in the county school. Most of the people of color who were employed in the school system worked in food service or janitorial jobs. My primary school only had three teachers of color in the entire school. When I attended junior high, there were no teachers of color there. The high school had five teachers of color and one out of the five taught special education. I refer to teachers of color as gatekeepers. Although they were few in number, they were instrumental in helping some of the African American students navigate through the school system. Gatekeepers used their positions in the school to look out for students of color. The low level of diversity in the school made it easier for students of color to navigate through the systemic racism that was present in the schools. There was only one private school in the area where the entire staff and student body were completely white.

School events were self-segregated and if students did not adhere to this unspoken code of segregation violence would break out. Jeremy Porter and colleagues (2014) suggests the
institutionalization of segregation in academies in the American South was designed to preserve the color line. Interracial dating was a taboo. History teachers never taught beyond the Civil War or on the Reconstruction Era. Students scored poorly on history exams because a large part of history was censored by the teachers. Our school books were thirty years old. Our libraries were small and censored. I was in upper level courses in large part to affirmative action. I was intelligent but the school counselor would advise pupils of color to take the lower programs where most of the curriculum were easy electives. I never had more than three African-Americans in any one class. My history teacher explained to the class that the reason I was intelligent was because I was light-skinned which meant that I had white blood in me and that is where my intelligence came from. The few African-Americans who were taking upper level courses met many challenges with disparate treatment by their teachers.

The education policies within the public school system I attended in the early days were directly impacted by the shameful history of the South and poor race relations between whites and African Americans. Mexicans began to move into the area toward the last two years of my time in high school. They were migrant workers and considered an ‘other’ from everyone else. A culmination of the effects of slavery, Civil War, and Jim Crow laws shaped school policies (Porter et al., 2014). There was a strong fear between both ethnic groups. It seemed that to me that the central driving force behind the fear was for control of power. Teachers were audacious and cruel with their racist comments towards students of color. *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* ruling was supposed to provide education equality to all students or at least that was the hope (Tate et al., 2014). Instead, public schools like those I attended still reflected the racial socialization of segregation. Racial socialization is defined as parental communications within families to their children on how to deal with race relations and conflicts (Tate et al.,
The racial socialization offered in my home was one of submission in order to gain knowledge from the teachers so that I could graduate and be able to move on in life. Attempts at interracial dating was frowned upon because violence always followed such actions. It was customary that every year a “race war” would break out in the schools because of a few students trying to mix with each other.

The books and facilities that my parents used when they attended my high school were the same as what was provided to me. Several of the teachers who taught my parents taught me. Newer teachers to the school were the children of older teachers who retired. When schools were required to desegregate, the only visible restructuring that happened was that students of color were now going to school with white students and that a few teachers in the school were teachers of color. Restructuring denotes significant educational change to redesign schools in response to policies and necessary organizational reforms to curriculum and pedagogy in hopes to eliminate inequalities within those institutions (Lipman, 1997). Such changes were not evident at my school in response to the Brown verdict. Instead, the teachers did all that they could to discourage students of color from taking college preparatory, participated in cheating scams (especially with athletes), and taught curriculum that was racist and hurtful to students of color.

School leadership failed to present standards that promoted appreciation for diversity and equality in the school as well as a means for holding teachers accountable for their inappropriate behavior. Teacher participation in attempting to implement educational reforms fail when both the teachers and the reforms lack the capacity and willingness for change at the classroom level (Lipman, 1997; McLaughlin, 1987). According to Morris & Morris (2005), pupils of color liked their teachers when they were in segregated schools because they felt that their instructors cared about them and made learning fun. The teachers at my school were predominately white who had
learn how to tolerate desegregation as the new normal but used their role as teachers to promote inequalities for students of color. The few gatekeepers who were in the school would do their best to mentor students of color they felt had promise of moving beyond the cacophony of racial turbulence and do something with their lives.

Race matters in the United States and pretending that it does not will not make it go away (Orfield, 2014). There has always been a lingering nostalgia for whites in my hometown for the lifestyle of the old South. Myths were created and perpetuated within high school history classes about how the slaves were all clothes and well fed on the plantation and that not all of them wanted to see slavery end. These types of lies filled the curriculum at my school. One day in history class a white male peer asked the teacher why she thought that some black students like myself were intelligent. The teacher responded because she has white blood in her family. She went on to say that the verification was in the fact that I was light skinned. His question then led to other questions directly towards me about other racist notions concerning Blacks like, do we use Crisco grease in our hair? The teacher interjected with an affirmative answer, that yes Blacks used Crisco in their hair. It was uncomfortable to sit through such disrespectful behavior from my classmates and teacher.

Race-conscious education policies like Brown could not address or eliminate racist actions within the classrooms. “The problem was caused not by a limited number of racist actions but by traditions and practices that embodied and perpetuated deeply entrenched racial inequality even without new discriminatory actions,” (Orfield, 2014, p. 274). Our family has always struggled with racial identity. My maternal grandfather’s mother owned land. Land ownership began on her side of the family because the slave master fathered children with a slave (who was my great-great-great-grandmother) and left her and their children 40 acres and a
mule each. My grandfather had five siblings. The understanding within the family at that time was to send the others off to school, especially the girls, and leave one male behind to work the land and support my grandmother. My grandfather’s parents had the money to send them all to school but this way of thinking would require that one of them remain close to home to farm. My grandfather was extremely close to his mother and chose to stay near her to assist her. He had a sixth grade education. It bothered him that he could not read well and celebrated as each of his children and grandchildren progressed beyond a sixth grade education. Members of my family who were fair skinned were always in conflict with those who were dark. The ideology from the plantation that worked to divide and demean slaves against each other is still very present today.

I received a poor education from my school system mainly because education policies like Brown did not have a plan beyond implementation. The social dynamics of urban education systems in the American South are very different from other education systems. Rural schools in the South lack the accountability and evaluation controls needed to monitor quality and equity for all. I feel that all of the students were at-risk under the racially charged ecology within our school because the curriculum and antiquated system overall failed each one of us. Many of us who went on to higher education were shocked to find out how poor our education was. We had to work extremely hard to catch up to where we should have been academically when we graduated from high school. It was devastating to learn that those honors courses that I fought so hard to attend and succeed in did not prepare me very well for college. Sadly, those same schools have not changed very much. Race relations have improved some but the overall level of equality and quality does not live up to what the Brown wanted it to be for all students in American public schools.
Language Policy

A language policy sets the parameters for language use in this study. It describes the ways in which ways in which language is used and legitimized (McCarty, 2011; Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008; McCarty, 2004). Education policy narratives have tangible consequences for those whose behavior the policies seek to regulate (McCarty, 2015; Stein, 2004; Shore & Wright, 1997). The most prevalent discursive tropes in U.S. education policy is related to the achievement gap metaphor. One of the pivotal ways the gap discourse regulates targeted groups is through federal mandated standardized tests (McCarty, 2015). This research examines the use of gap and at-risk language in education policies that constructs a logic that marginalizes certain populations of students such as African Americans. Standardized tests seem neutral and fair for all while concealing the systemic power inequities the evaluation scheme was based upon (Hart & Risley, 1995). The goal in this dissertation is to reveal how education policy discourses use this type of language and what it means for those who are labelled under these terms.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) discourse was central in creating the notion of poverty as an individual problem of parents who are unable to provide for the intellectual, moral and financial support of their children (McCarty, 2015; Stein, 2004). The culture of poverty was an idea that is rooted in the ethnographic work of Oscar Lewis (1959) that use race and class-based deficit thinking to understand the struggles poor families face. The most effective outcome of culture of poverty discourses has diverted attention away from institutional educational inequities based on race and class in policies viewpoint (Stein, 2004). Discourse that stem from zero tolerance policy approaches to school discipline that began during the 1980s and 1990s has led to policy language around the school to prison pipeline (StPP). Zero tolerance
policies put students at-risk for reducing or eliminating access to an educational opportunity due to extensive suspensions and expulsions from school. African American students are disproportionately overrepresented in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions which is not due to poverty or higher rates of disciplinary infractions (Skiba, 2013). The belief that tough school disciplinary measures would curtail disruptive behavior in schools is at the core of zero tolerance policies. A study on racial disproportionality in discipline show that race not poverty is the reason for racial gaps on discipline (Wallace et al., 2008). Russell Skiba (2015) says school systems that rely heavily on school exclusion for disciplinary practices push students out of school and increase their contact with the justice system.

Race and race talk is important in school to prison pipeline discourses because it helps to criminalize Blackness and normalize whiteness (Heitzeg, 2015; Ignatiev, 1997). It offers a framework that perversely justifies funneling Black and Brown populations into the prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Feagin, 2013; Walker et al., 2012). Criminalizing narratives support ongoing efforts of systemic oppression such as excessive surveillance and forms of institutional segregation against Black people for profit through a partnership with the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010; Brewer, 2007, Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Roberts 1997, 2004). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) explains that certain groups of “Others” are labelled for social control based on race, class, gender, and other differences which determines their access to social control and opportunity. Whites are responsible for the majority of all crimes committed in the U.S. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012; Simon, 2006; Follman et al., 2013; Heitzeg, 2015). One of the main benefits of white privilege is the right to represent oneself without fear that one’s actions will be used to condemn everyone in that racial category (Heitzeg, 2015; De Vega, 2012). Racial perceptions of crimes and criminals are managed by the
way the media covers the topics (Entman & Cross, 2008; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Rhymes, 2009). When Black children are discussed in school punishment data, their age does not mitigate the irrational fear triggered in some by the presence of Blackness (Whitlock & Heitzeg, 2013).

The term “Black” which refers to African Americans will be capitalized and used to describe a racial category. Sometimes in my research data, participants talk about nonwhite racial groups as people of color or students of color. The research data also uses the term minority to mean nonwhite racial categories. I use the term to describe its quantitative meaning not racial and political meanings. I will not capitalize the term “white” when also using it to describe a racial category unless it is the first word in a sentence. Here, I follow the Du Boisian tradition of capitalizing the word Black to acknowledge and render respect on the page for those who The New York Times states have been for generations in the “lower case” (Du Bois, 2007; Tharps, 2014; The New York Times, 1930). Race matters are manifested through public discourse, organizational power arrangements, and social norms and practices (Harrison, 1995). This study is concerned with the discourse dimension of dominance and by capitalizing the racial category of Black and not white is an act of disrupting the tools of whiteness discursively. The language use in any citations from school publications such as public school meeting minutes, code of conduct manuals, archival data, or transcriptions of observation field notes and in-depth interviews will not be changed in any way. Language is a form of power and by allowing the participants to “speak” without alteration is a way to hear their perspectives without censorship (Thomas, 1993). The focus of this study is strictly discursive. In order to examine the participants’ “truth” in this research as well as structural and other social arrangements and how they provide a broader meaning to operations of human conditions in public school settings and contribute to practices of social injustices, the voices of the participants must be unaltered. Per
the institutional review board (IRB) protocol, all names and site location in this study are pseudonyms.

**Data collection**

*Gaining Access*

As a qualitative researcher it is vital that our entry into the research scene is conducted in an appropriate and ethical manner (Madison, 2012). When I began casing the joint or visiting the research site to establish relationships to see if my research idea was viable in this setting, I had several informal meetings with educational leaders in the central office. Although access to district meetings and meeting minutes were open to the public, I wanted to introduce myself to district leaders and explain my research project to them. I asked them for their permission to attend the public meetings as a researcher. They were very receptive and appreciative of this gesture and they said that they would do whatever they could to assist me with my research. I built a relationship with the district office secretary who was instrumental in writing the meeting minutes and making sure they were posted online in a timely manner. Educational leaders have asked that I provide them with a summary of my findings from my dissertation research after it is complete to be used for school improvement measures.

*Observations*

Observations provide a qualitative mode inquiry that place data in the context of educational leadership and school reform in the district. A qualitative reflexive design allows the researcher to capture educational reality as participants experience them (Check & Schutt, 2012). Observations provide an awareness of the culture of school boards and helps to explain the collective human praxis. Public meeting observations focuses on human subjectivity on ways the participants are attached to educational events. I am able to become a part of the educational
process or phenomenon under study, and keep track of my own actions and reactions to the educational events. I chose to observe school board and committee meetings at Blakesdale over two academic year period (2016-2017; 2017-2018) to understand the dilemmas of governance and implementation of equitable educational policies in a school district struggling with racism. Blakesdale has been sued by the local African American community for racial unfairness which resulted in a federal consent decree that lasted a decade. The District is currently under review by the State Board of Education for racial academic and disciplinary disparities of African American students. I wanted to understand the idea of policy as an instrument of governance at the local and view how educational leaders and communities negotiated issues of race, class, and gender in the policymaking process. The race talk by participants on the school board and committees reveal that white supremacy is deeply embedded within school policies that continue to reduce and limited the educational opportunity of African American students at Blakesdale.

A critical ethnographer disrupts neutrality and assumptions projected into groups of people by revealing obscure operations of power and domination (Madison, 2012). Observations provide an awareness of the culture of school boards and committees and helps to explain the collective human praxis. My work seeks to give broader meaning to operations of human conditions in school settings with deep ties to systems of oppression such segregation and contribute to the formation of practices of educational equity and justice for all students in public schools. The task of an education policy researcher is to design the information needed by policymakers to develop interventions (Hammersley, 2002). Educational research should have practical applications. The concept of policy is supposed to shape and guide institutional behaviors around the operations of an institution. However, policies and the process of policymaking is at the discretion of those crafting and implementing those policies to use their
vested political power to distribute or withhold goods and services as they wish (Downey, 1988). Partnering with educational leaders and the communities they serve is necessary in order to become a part of the educational structure that is responsible for enacting policies that help and sometimes hinder the achievement of students. As a researcher, it is paramount that I am an embedded supporter in the research site and not be seen as an outsider ‘doing’ research for my own personal gain.

As a field researcher, I reflect upon and interpret my field experiences through my writing. Ethnography allows the ethnographer to immerse themselves in the worlds of others with a certain level of distance that is present. Immersion does not mean merging. Conducting fieldwork is a personal experience that require the use of our senses, intuition, and emotions all powerfully woven into the research process (Madison, 2012; Bacon, 1979). Critical ethnography necessitates that we have a deep awareness to our ethnographic positionality that must remain rooted firmly in the empirical world of the other (Madison, 2012). The Other in this context are those who we are in dialogue with in our research. Positionality demands that we shift our focus away from our own individual or subjective selves and attend to how our subjectivity is related to the Other (2012; p. 9). Dwight Conquergood (1983) says that one of the aims of dialogue is to bring the self and Other together in order to question, debate, and challenge each other in ways that embody the interplay and exchange between human beings. Ethnographic field notes provide a space to write down the experiences observed which can become a marginalizing act that exposes the fact that the writer is an outsider (Emerson et al., 1995). The ethnographer is not neutral in the writing and interpretation process that is reflexive and interlocks theory and data dialogically. All assertions made from fieldwork must demonstrate a cogent theoretical and empirical link (Thomas, 1993). Writing and choosing which texts to include in a story requires
the writer to connect the relevance of the texts to local occurrences as they relate to analytical issues (Atkinson, 1990; Emerson et al., 1995).

**Interviewing**

I conducted interviews with district educational leaders and one member of the board of education for Blakesdale school district. I did not use a recording device while interviewing. I used a semi-structured interview protocol as a conversation starter that helped me stay on track and ask the questions that I wanted answered. Many of the questions came from reading meeting minutes or observing what participants had to say during public school meetings I attended. The rhetoric during these school meetings were often racially charged and I wanted to give the participants an opportunity to explain themselves. Interviewees were intimidated by the fact that I had read meeting minutes and brought them to the interview in order to gain clarity on things they had said in those meetings as well as aspects of the meetings that were concealed such as executive sessions. I interviewed Mr. Jackson as a part of my preliminary data research. Mr. Jackson is the chair of the DEA taskforce and the director of student learning at Blakesdale. He is the primary point person for disciplinary data and programs. The race talk in the meeting minutes were alarming and I wanted to have an opportunity to talk to him directly to give him the chance to clear up any perceptions I had about things he had said in the meetings. The local news outlets had also reported on an incident where sixteen African American students had been arrested from one of Blakesdale’s high schools and their parents had filed a complaint against Blakesdale. I wanted to talk to him about that situation to get a sense of how the district planned to improve disciplinary disparities in the district. Mr. Jackson is an African American man and I wanted to know how his positionality as such influenced the way he did his job. The semi-
structured interview protocol I used for his interview was tailored specifically to issues around his responsibilities for discipline data and programs.

I interviewed Dr. Robin Davis who is the only African American woman on the board of education and only one of two members of color currently serving on the board. I was interested in interviewing her because for the majority of the time that she has been on the board she was the only member to vote against long term suspension or expulsion of students. Recently, that has changed some, but that procedure is done in executive session which is closed to the public. I wanted to get a sense of the debates that go on during those sessions. Her interview protocol was tailored specifically towards questions I had about specific issues that happened during board meetings included those in executive session as well as her the way she approaches her role on the board. She was extremely nervous at the beginning of the interview because I had all of the minutes laid out and she felt cautious about her answers. I assured her that I was not coming for her and that I wanted to interview her to gain understanding. She relaxed after that and we had an extremely emotional, but fruitful discussion that lasted for almost four hours! I have had several informal conversations with other central office leaders before and after meetings as well as through email exchanges. I chose not to interview others because I felt that their comments during public meetings answered the questions I had about their roles in the process.

The semi-structured interview in this research is viewed as a conversation where knowledge is produced through conversation between the interviewer and interviewee (Skinner, 2012). Interviewing as a method is discursive and provides empirical insight into the views of the research participants in this study. Interviews should be open-ended so that the interviewee has the opportunity to tell their story (Roe, 1994). Interviews allows one to gain insights from another giving the perspective of the interviewee a place of importance in the narrative of the
research. Interviews are helpful research tools for gathering information that observations cannot provide (Patton, 2002). The purpose for conducting interviews in this study is to capture the perspective of the school officials regarding their reasons for making certain decisions regarding students in the school district. This is important to understand the standpoint of the school officials and reveal the ideological contexts that influences their beliefs and practices. Qualitative interviews with district educational leaders are based on convenience sampling. Their positions are specifically assigned to them and roles and perspectives are pertinent to the validity of the research.

*Archival Data*

Archival documents were retrieved from a collection at my local university library that chronicled lawsuits, public school meetings, and personal correspondence from school officials and community members since 1991. I chose to begin my analysis of the archival data starting in 1998 because those documents illustrated the tensions that were going on between the African American community and the school district that led up to the consent decree. Local archival data is helpful to obtain information about social and organizational characteristics of the community under study (Schensul, 2013). I used local secondary data produced by the school district such as their academic and disciplinary achievement data, demographic characteristics, minutes from public meetings, and interviews from the local newspaper on the district. All of these documents were vital in the process of listening and depicting school and community attitudes towards the issues of education policy, equity, race, and law at Blakesdale.

James Scott (1990) explores the relationship between power and discourse by what he calls the public transcript and hidden transcript which reveal structural forms of domination to subordinate certain groups. The public transcript is when dominant elites depict through public
social action a denial that they use their power to subordinate others. Scott asserts that as structures of domination operate they elicit resistance from the oppressed. The hidden transcript emerges as the oppressed speak directly and publicly to power. The archival data I draw upon in this study demonstrates these concepts extremely well. School officials at Blakesdale while under lawsuits filed by the African American community resisted compliance of terms and conditions of the legal agreements. During board and committee meetings, school leaders deflected from discussing any meaningful measures to comply with federal law. Archival data provides a historical collection of the race talk narratives that reveal the structural processes of schooling and that are mediated by oppositional cultures as well as individual and collective forms of resistance to reform.

Analyzing, coding, and logging data

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is associated with the study of power relations. The perspective of marginalized groups are deemed controversial and their evaluations of practices by whites that oppress them are regarded as biased and self-serving or less reliable evidence (Van Dijk, 1993). Discourse is language use seen as a type of social practice. Discourses construct social relations and position people categorically as social subjects and is a form of ideology of linguistic material (Fairclough, 1992). Critical refers to illuminating hidden causal effects that require interventions for those who are disadvantaged through processes of change. Social practices that are centered on notions of hegemonic ideologies whereby domination is dependent on alliances of subordinate groups and the need for consent. CDA is an interpretive and explanatory analytic that can address social problems and show how power relations are discursive (Rogers, 2004). Corson (2000) posits that the association between hidden power relations and discourse illustrates the ways in which it creates inequalities. According to Teun
van Dijk (2013), mental models are presuppositions individuals have about other people that
determines how they talk about groups of people. He goes on to say that the use of metaphors are
extremely important in creating mental models in public discourses by how people and events
are described. Metaphors used in public discourses can lead to harmful practices for groups of
people and even lawsuits against institutions. An example of this is when teachers and school
officials in urban schools talk about their views of low parental involvement from parents that
come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. A discourse that emerges is that parents from low
socioeconomic backgrounds do not care about their children. This statement lacks evidence for
why school officials would conclude that students from low income families have parents who
do not care about them. It infers that households with limited income streams produce uncaring
parents. This kind of discourse from school officials can reduce educational opportunities for
students from low income families as well as create a situation where their parents do not feel
welcome to participate in their child’s educational process. The difference between ideology and
mental models is that ideology can be systemic and represent a collective, but mental models are
individual and influenced by one’s personal experiences (Van Dijk, 2013). When public
discourse from institutions like schools become racialized so as to produce practices of
discrimination, this form of discourse can lead to state and federal level consent decrees and
other forms of lawsuits that attempt to hold the school system accountable for their
discriminatory rhetoric and practices.

Research that is designed to make empirical assertions about a phenomenon examines the
relationship between form and function of language (Gee, 2004). CDA combines models of
grammatical, visual, and textual analyses with sociopolitical and critical theories. CDA posits
that language use is always connected to specific social practices that have implications for the
distribution of power. CDA is a discursive analytic that help one to understand power-knowledge relationships in public school meetings. The utility of CDA of addressing education policy issues at large and continue to be the dominant discourse analytical approach used in educational research (Lester et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2016). CDA shows how policy is constructed, enacted, implemented, and resisted at the level of language (Lester et al., 2017). Education discourses helps to develop and organize policy institutionally and within specific educational agendas. Knowledge is established through language (Burr, 2003). CDA in my research design is used to examine how district educational leaders’ public discourses are linked to education policy issues of academic achievement and disciplinary disparities and how it shapes and limits the possibility for progressive change for the most vulnerable students in the school district.

I used open coding and memoing to analyze my data and to identify race talk, issues of class and gender, and how power relations were negotiated within a segregated school system. I did not use any software to code my documents. Open coding requires ethnographers to read all documents line-by-line to identify ideas and concepts (Emerson et al., 1995). After each meeting or interview I wrote up memos that helped me connect to analytic themes that occurred during the meetings. I approached my analysis as a data set that allowed me to examine systematically what I observed and recorded more closely. I wrote codes in the margins of my jottings and memos that helped me remember the feelings and nonverbal communication that happened during the meetings. I was able to identify points in the data when school officials were resisting change. Counter-narratives recast prevalent policy narratives that opposes the narrative in dispute. Power and politics are articulated discursively in controversies and disputes where
policy narrative analytics are applied properly. Power and resource distribution are interlocked in contesting stories that have the potential to effective policy decisions.

The work of education policy is to provide goals and strategies for problem solving. Education policymaking and administration reveal the nexus of power and voice (Diem & Young, 2015). The disproportion of power is seen discursively by who is allowed to participate in decision-making process and who those decisions benefit (Diem et al., 2014). Who loses due to a lack of representation in the decision-making process? Education policy has embedded within it policy rhetoric and the opportunity to guide practice. Inequalities and privilege are two main concerns of education policy discourse because the distribution of power has greater implication for those who are poor versus this who are affluent. The portrayal of what is real in society comes from a corporate culture that influences how democratic public spheres operate and are imagined (McLaren, 1995). Race talk dilemmas are important to examine because school districts are centers for learning and the ideological standpoint of school leaders regarding issues of race, class, gender, disabilities, etc. determine the experiences students and their families will have and how successful the district will be able to perform academically. An example of my fieldwork log is located in the Appendix.
CHAPTER 4: BREAKING BAD? RACIAL DISTRICT DISCOURSE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC AND DISCIPLINARY DISPARITIES

Discourse of Segregation and African American Student Achievement at Blakesdale School District

On March 15, 2006, the PIC met with Dr. Joseph, a faculty member at the local university in Blakesdale, to discuss a partnership in the Great Schools program to increase academic achievement for at-risk students. The conversation below was about thinking about how the Great Schools program developed by the university could help narrow the achievement gap of at-risk students at Blakesdale.

We have the opportunity to take an advantage of the interest that the university has and making its presence much clearer locally. There is a very rich opportunity to have something that hasn’t really happened here formally before. How do we manage to take advantage of this, in a way that makes good educational sense? Dr. Lane, Blakesdale’s school superintendent, would really like to be involved in this. He wants to be involved in the Great Schools Committee, so that whatever is developed is research-based because when you look at the research about transitions, it’s not really good for at-risk kids in relationship to achievement. The grand committee has very broad interests and has nothing to do with the Great Campus. We are trying to get the local university tied into the school district to make it beneficial for everyone. That’s what the exchange was intended to do, to get some intellectual exchange going. However, the exchange failed for reasons that people know about.

The conversation changed directions and began to highlight the issue of segregation in the local community and public schooling. “At this time for political reason in the state, the university intends to have a large footprint. It’s not going to be possible for the university to justify doing anything in Chicago if it hasn’t been a good neighboring home. The [university] Chancellor gave a speech saying that the university will never build a building that turn its back on the North side [Black segregated neighborhood] of Blakesdale,” (PIC meeting minutes, 3/15/2006). The university constructed a large research center that in fact “turn[ed] its back on the North side of
Blakesdales. The facility can only be accessed from the South side [white neighborhoods] of Blakesdale.

As we’re talking about designing another model that will intend to do this, one member said she would like to ask about community engagement. When we talk about community investment, our city has no plan for investment back into this [North side] neighborhood. Dr. Joseph said the university is only going to do this if there’s money for them to do this. We are putting the community at risk to have another plan, another chance to do this and fail because the economics behind it may not be there. [The Chancellor] hopes that we would try to disrupt anything that is happening that’s not about strong and real community. If he is only interested in this for what it’s going to do for professor’s kids, doing business, research in bringing in other kids, etc… Great Campus will not have a great impact. We’re talking about seats on the North that’s educationally sound for our kids and families. It is important to have the carefree folks there and get the families engaged from our perspectives and our focus is African American kids. Dr. Joseph replied to that, by saying that he would say that there are certain things that have to be done differently. He is really concerned about the cost. Somebody has to talk about what combination of public dollars is going into this project. They can’t talk about public dollars in this context or in the context of that particular effort and exclude the African American community.

Dr. Joseph and other African American members of the PIC were concerned about viability of the Great Schools program actually benefitting African American students and their communities on the North side of Blakesdale. One community member noted that that the city of Blakesdale has “no plan for investment back into the [North side] neighborhoods,” (PIC meeting minutes, 3/15/2006). The discussion revealed how Blakesdale’s plans for community development that is funded with public money excludes the African American community.

Ms. Sikes asked if we assume that we’re comfortable with people offering to do some research. One member said her only concern is that research can be skewed if we try something with no commitment involved. Another member said she wanted to make sure that the research we’re looking for benefits our children. Someone mentioned that they had heard a community member say they wondered if they could trust the school district in doing what is best for their children, but also he’s heard the approach of community members wanting to bring something to table. Dr. Joseph said he knows the District is aware of the increased attention to the decline of white male’s grades. The focus on males may have to receive renewed attention. Secondly, Dr. Joseph asked if the taskforce has a monitoring system that allows you to tell whether kids in Level III who make use of support services perform differently than kids in Level III who do not. One committee member
replied they do not and Ms. Sikes brought up a similar question. He said there is not a systemic process in place,” (PIC meeting minutes, 3/15/2006).

The discourse throughout the data at Blakesdale is centered on negotiating school resources between the North side of Blakesdale County [the Black neighborhoods] and the South side [the white neighborhoods]. School building that are located on the North side of Blakesdale are known as neighborhood schools and are racially identifiable. Residential segregation is a running theme through the discourse at Blakesdale both during the consent decree years and now. Segregation still persist at Blakesdale School District as well as within the county.

*Searching for interventions to reduce academic and disciplinary disparities during the consent decree*

In 2002, Dr. Shultz, a member of the court monitoring team and educational consultant, returned to Blakesdale to follow up on where the district was regarding racial academic and disciplinary disparities since his last report was presented in 1998. Some of the issues that Dr. Shultz found in his progress report of Blakesdale showed the following (PIC meeting, 12-10-2002):

- Using discipline as an intervention rather than punishment.
- Unwarranted disparities in the assignment of minority students to the special education and gifted programs.
- Disparities in the enrollment of African-American students in upper level courses at the high school level.
- The need to hire, train, place and retain larger members of African-American teachers.

Why does Blakesdale see discipline as an intervention instead of punishment? These interventions are primarily assigned for African American students. They send a message about who is considered deviant and who is considered safe. Racism is used to create this perception about students of color in urban school settings. The suspension data at Blakesdale has consistently shown that 70% of all suspensions were of African American students. Currently,
the overall suspension rate has increased to 76%. Dr. Shultz said that Blakesdale has made no progress in terms of equity and disciplinary disparities since he conducted his equity audit on the district in 1998. On October 1, 2013, the DEA taskforce hosted an event that included two educational consultants from New York University (NYU) to help the taskforce discuss possible interventions around 1) access to AP, honors, and gifted classes, 2) reading/literacy scores K-12, and 3) discipline numbers among African-American students.

As small groups discussed whether the Code [of Conduct Manual] was positive and proactive or punitive and reactive and which students are being disciplined, one group asked, for purposes of this exercise, how discipline is being defined. This led to a discussion of semantics and interpretation of the word ‘discipline.’ One task force member gave the example that some ‘honors’ type students might consider redirection, e.g., ‘Stop talking,’ as discipline, whereas other students would not. Maria then referenced page 1 of the Code which states: ‘We, the members of the Blakesdale Schools, community—teachers, students, administrators, and community members—will seek to use discipline as an intervention strategy to improve student behavior and academic performance.’ Maria pointed out that discipline is not an intervention. There seemed to be unanimous agreement that discipline is not an intervention, but how discipline should be categorized, if not as an intervention, was not answered, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-1-2013).

Here is an example of how Blakesdale as an institution structure and shape the political and social interpretation of school discipline. The micro-political debate of policy enactment is through institutional language of how the problem is defined (Whiteman et al., 2017; Bidwell, 1965).

Many task force members reported that there are a variety of interventions listed in the Code (p. 8 elementary and p. 19 secondary) and in use in the district (e.g., Essential Social Curriculum, Nurtured Heart, instruction of PBIS universals, etc.) but, except for a few exceptions, they are not listed in the ‘Recommended Range of Consequences;’ therefore, the Code is more punitive and reactive than positive and proactive. An administrator asked what the consequences for a severe misbehavior would be if it wasn’t discipline. Maria indicated re-teaching should be the consequence. She asked if the District utilizes re-teaching. Mr. Jackson indicated that a review of a school’s SWIS data would show the behaviors that need re-teaching and that re-teaching occurs to different extents with different teachers and students. A task force member stated that for African-American students with repeat suspensions, it’s more than just the Code that’s not working, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10/1/2013).
There are two ways in which racial inequalities are reproduced in society is through institutional organizational practices and social representations (Ferguson, 2001). Equity outcomes are defined as the benefits of the education process. School systems are often assessed by as good or bad based on individual behaviors of the students and their families and not the schools themselves. As “a task force member stated that for African-American students with repeat suspensions, it’s more than just the Code that’s not working,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10/1/2013). Discipline policies alone do not change structural school climate issues of racism and inequity. Those policies can be used to exacerbate those problems. “An administrator pointed out that although expectations are taught and modeled, the rationale for the expectation may not be clear, particularly to African-American students. Another task force member reported that code switching is important and that not all teachers are able to do this,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-1-2013). Code-switching occurs when people in a conversation mix language and dialects in a conversation. However, Gene Demby (2013) says code switching changes the way you talk to others between linguistic and cultural spaces. It illustrates the ways in which we deal with race, ethnicity, and culture through our social interactions.

Nyla asked to what extent schools should adapt to students and vice versa. Nyla advised that schools take an “inquiry stance” by studying and understanding student behavior in order to adapt the school to the student. An administrator mentioned Donna Ford’s teaching that different behaviors come with different cultures. Although this administrator concurred with this sentiment, she said she didn’t know if it would be “viable” to consider this relative to a student code of conduct. A task force member asked how we would prepare young African-American males (our highest target population for purposes of reducing disparity in the area of discipline) for society if we set different expectations for different cultures. Nyla’s response was that a culturally responsive code does not mean lowering behavioral expectations; it means meeting the needs of the students so that they can be successful. Several task force members grappled with how the District could develop a code of conduct that is culturally responsive while simultaneously maintaining behavioral expectations and school safety. Maria’s answer was that it be done through “actions, procedures, and intrinsically motivating practices.” She said in order to motivate students, we need their input on development of the Code. (It was noted that secondary students participated on the development of the Code last year.) The question was raised
by a task force member whether the Code is “fair and consistent.” This led to a discussion of “fairness” versus “equity” and to which concept the Code should be aimed. This question was not resolved,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-1-2013).

I interviewed one of two Black members of the board of education for Blakesdale to talk about the disciplinary disparities. Dr. Robin Davis is an African American woman. Below is an excerpt from our conversation (Interview data, 3-7-18)

Koissaba: The district data for achievement and disciplinary disparities show that marginalized groups of students, especially African American students are being punished and mistreated in the school district at disproportionate rates. In what ways can we rethink the ways in which the school district can be structured to become a more inclusive and safe environment for these populations of students? (e.g. new district leadership, additional training on social justice, difference and identity issues, decriminalizing the school setting by removing law enforcement)

Dr. Davis: Trauma literature is being used to understand what is going on with kids. Black kids get treated as adult when white kids get to be treated as kids.

Koissaba: Do you think disciplinary practices in your district or school are racially biased? Why or why not?

Dr. Davis: We need to hear from those parents whose kids have been expelled or suspended. It is unlikely that we will be able to hear from them because they don’t want to show up to public meeting and be outing. The people we need to hear from will not talk to us.

Koissaba: What do you think are the major problems of increasing academic achievement in your school?

Dr. Davis: We need to look at what we need to do in education in the context of what is going on now to inform our interventions.

School boards are important and demonstrate how local communities manage and are accountable for public education. School boards provide a space where the public has the opportunity to change and improve the public schooling through a democratic process of governance (Alsbury, 2008; Lutz & Wang, 1987). However, “we [the school board] need to hear
from those parents whose kids have been expelled or suspended. It is unlikely that we will be able to hear from them because don’t want to show up to public meeting and be outing. The people we need to hear from will not talk to us,” (Interview data, 3/7/18). The parents she is referring to are African American parents whose children have been displaced from their educational opportunity due to expulsion or suspension. They are not a part of the democratic process of governing at Blakesdale schools because they have been silenced by shame. Many teachers and school leaders use color blind perspectives as a way of attempting to treat all student the same. However, what happens is that in the classroom those color blind ideas are dismissed by teachers and they become complicit in racialized practices against marginalized students (Bryan et al, 2012; Pollock, 2004a; Thompson, 2005; Tatum, 1999; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Jay, 2002). This is why it is important for school board members to think critically about how their work affects the most vulnerable students in their districts.

Dr. Davis made an important observation when she said, “Black kids get treated as adults when white kids get to be treated as kids.” How can Blakesdale offer interventions for behavioral problems to African American students when they are not viewed or treated as children, but as adults. This became evident to me when I interviewed Mr. Jackson about an incident in 2014 where fifteen African American students were arrested at the high school without the school involving their parents. The parents of the students were upset and filed a complaint of against the district for how they treated their kids. Below is an excerpt of that interview where I asked him about the incident (Interview data, 1-20-17).

**Koissaba:** A group of African American parents filed a complaint against the district citing excessive arrests and suspensions that they feel are racially motivated. What can you say about that?

**Mr. Jackson:** Out of the 16 arrest cases 15 of the arrests were warranted.
Koissaba: Were all of the students African American?

Mr. Jackson: Yes.

Koissaba: What has changed in the number of disciplinary actions taken against specifically, students of color in your district since the formal complaint was filed?

Mr. Jackson: There have been no major changes in how the district is handling disciplinary issues in schools. School Resource Officers (SROs) remain in schools. Arrest rates have been on the decline yearly since 2014. Oversight committee have been established to offer training to teachers and administrators on critical race education.

Koissaba: Why are all of the disciplinary interventions geared exclusively towards African Americans?

Mr. Jackson: Because the data shows that is where the problem is. You cannot train someone to care and not be racist.

Mr. Jackson seemed annoyed that I brought up the incident. I was annoyed and concerned with his response to my questions about why all the disciplinary interventions were geared exclusively towards African American students. According to him African American students are a problem in the district. Disciplinary data is used to explain who and how African American students are problematic. Color-blindness is the race talk used to conceal the operationalization of whiteness structurally. Disciplinary disparities are connected to the structural displacement of African American students who are poor and male. Children conform to what they experience in their environments. We must create loving environments if we want loving children. No punishment should ever result in the loss of educational opportunity for any child (Jackson, 2001). When schools incorporate law enforcement or school resource officers (SROs) into their disciplinary action plans they present a convergence between school and the criminal justice system (Simmons, 2017). The students in question were minors, but were treated like adults.
when they were arrested. Their parents were not called or consulted in any way before they were arrested.

**Public Discourse on Discipline and Academic Achievement Links**

“A task force member referenced some reading she had been doing on the topic of reading and brain science. She reported that some scientists believe that a segment of the population will never learn to read. If this is true, and academic success and behavior are inherently linked, how would students who are doomed to be academically unsuccessful learn appropriate behavior? Maria responded by saying it was her understanding that the District does not have an elementary reading curriculum. Some of the elementary teachers on the task force took exception to this statement and clarified that the District has a reading curriculum, but that it offers a “menu” of offerings that emphasize phonics, phonemic awareness, and balanced literacy. A task force member stated that, in recent years, reading instruction has suffered from a lack of professional development, changing priorities at the central office level, and increasing time demands on teachers. Another task force member paraphrased a central office administrator who reportedly said, “It’s not about the stuff; it’s a menu,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-1-13). The way to improve achievement gaps and discipline disparities require school officials to do a better job at building relationships with students of color. However, the problem with this notion is that it assumes that white educational leaders are the only perpetrators of racial biases and behaviors. Educational leaders of color can and do display the same level of racist attitudes towards marginalized students of color. Therefore, whiteness should be viewed as a social identity that is linked to relations of domination (Frankenberg, 1993). White middle-class norms dominate many schools that creates a culture whereby school officials often have negative views about low-income and minority families. These deficit-based ideologies become embedded in the
school’s norms, policies, and practices even by teachers who self-identify as good teachers of African American students (Buehler, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Weinstein et al., 1995). The ways in which race talk become evident is the ways in which language reveals the ideologies of school officials which is used to create chaotic school environments. The taskforce member who said, “she had been doing on the topic of reading and brain science… [and] reported that some scientists believe that a segment of the population will never learn to read. [She asked] if this is true, and academic success and behavior are inherently linked, how would students who are doomed to be academically unsuccessful learn appropriate behavior?” Here the taskforce member is eluding to scientific racism where she is linking students who misbehaves to those who “inherently” not perform well academically.

“Dr. Cynthia Jones presented the elementary data. Most of the data was the same as last academic year except that the MAP math test scores showed gains for all racial groups except whites. White students have had a 2% drop in their math scores overall. This statement was glossed over surprisingly. The members of the committee seemed surprised at this information but did not offer any questions or comments as to their thoughts on why the phenomenon happened. This was significant because white students have always been presented as standard achievers. The notion of equity and education subconsciously did not include them. It was restated that the data reports show the students in the 20th percentile because students at that level reflect those who need additional help,” (EEE meeting observation memo notes, 8-24-17). This data report was different than what the superintendent presented in February of the same year. In fact, the superintendent quarreled with the NAACP representative and could not answer her questions as to why African American students were struggling in their math scores and what the district planned to do about it. A research report by Noguera & Wing (2006), shows that
Black and Latinos at Berkley High School (BHS) are underrepresented in every positive academic outcome in the school. Poor white students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds as their minority counterparts did better academically. Although the white students were poor, they were given the opportunity to enroll in more progressive academic tracks in the school even though their test scores and grades did not support their placements. Poor students of color were not given the same chance to advance in school as their poor white peers because they had to deal with deficit-based assumptions about their race and academic abilities. In other words, the low socioeconomic status of white students did not affect the opportunities they were allowed to have nor did they have to live up to deficit views about their academic abilities like Black and Latinos.

“A taskforce member asked Maria what her findings were at the middle school level in regards to reading instruction. Maria indicated reading proficiency gaps were exacerbated at middle school, reading interventions were not coordinated and inter-related, and teachers were not well trained. Another task force member reported that the professional development component is being addressed. Maria noted that the Code offers a range of consequences but “severe” misbehavior is open to interpretation. Later in the day, one of the discussions centered on whether having a range of consequences is positive or negative. Having a range can be a positive in that it affords each situation and student to be dealt with individually and allows administrators professional discretion as they consider the six factors (p. 8, p. 18 of the Code) prior to determining a consequence. Maria stated that a range of consequences also results in more gray and less black and white decisions and, hence, more subjectivity. A task force member reported that for the past 10 years, this committee has discussed the quandary of ranges versus finite consequences and although both have pros and cons, the most recent consensus was to
allow a range of consequences. Another task force member reported that she has worked in
districts that used ranges and in districts that used finite consequences and in her experience, she
feels ranges are fairer,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-1-13). The way teachers think and
talk about their students will affect the choices they make regarding punishment and control in
the classroom. The way students behave in class is connected to whether the level of instruction
is engaging and interesting. School boards and committees have been given the authority to
make decisions about suspensions and expulsions. This is problematic because the fate of
students’ educational futures is placed in the hands of a select few with limited accountability for
the decisions they make.

The question was raised as to the purpose of a code of conduct and whether it should be a
document that includes in-depth information and explanation of interventions and
proactive measures, or merely be a list of consequences for specific types of defined
misbehavior, an ‘if, then’ kind of document. Maria said not much mention is made in the
Code to explain what type of instruction/support is offered proactively to students prior to
meting out a punitive/reactive consequence. Mr. Jackson stated that discipline data
remained stable for the month of September with [discipline referrals] DR’s and
suspensions for African-American students constituting approximately 72% of the total.
Mr. Jackson explained that the purpose of the DEA Work Day on Oct. 1 was to determine
whether the Student Code of Conduct causes a disproportionate number of African-
American students to be disciplined. Mr. Jackson reported that although there was a lot of
“rich dialogue” that day, the researchers did not leave the committee with any specific
action steps despite some members’ requests to do so, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes,
10-10-13).

Academic performance suffers when students regularly observe verbal and physical abuse in
their school setting (Rivers et al., 2009). Racial discrimination contributes to academic failure,
delinquent behaviors, and dropout rates for students of color. Supportive environments at home
and school are imperative for the development of constructive behavior and academic success in
school for adolescent youth (Hopson et al., 2014). Creating pressure at the local policy level is
vital to introducing school discipline reform that is contextual to the needs of specific school
districts that serve small urban and rural communities and that call for a collaborative effort of all
stakeholder to work together with governmental officials to create better reforms (Kingdom, 1995).

Mr. Jackson asked if changing the language in our Code would change student behavior. A member said she didn’t think it would. She said she would like to observe a/some school districts with which the NYU group has worked in order to see their codes in practice. She said she’d also like to see their discipline data. A member said she believes staff who voluntarily attend professional development designed to enhance understanding of cultural differences will be amenable to change, but others who are mandated to attend will see no purpose in it and remain unchanged. A member said he believes practice is more important than policy. He said changing the language in the Code may eventually change people’s thinking, but we could probably keep our Code as it is but concentrate our efforts on changing practices. David Seawald said he thinks some of the language in the NYC code offers families more ‘hope,’ (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-10-13).

It is time that we stop “getting tough” on struggling schools, their students, and staff because it is causing damage to our education system and our society (AEJ, 2011; Mediratta, 2014).

Instead, we should turn our attention to creating policies that allow us to use all of our resources in a manner that benefits everyone.

One of the elementary school principals said he likes the ‘positive stance’ that is the underpinning of the NYC document, but believes before our District can make a true shift in thinking, a larger group of diverse stakeholders, including administrators, staff, parents, and students, needs to come together to address current practices in the area of student discipline. A question was asked if revised language would impact the 3% of the enrollment (percentage of students who receive 3+ suspensions a year) the District is targeting, the majority of whom are African-American. A member stated he believes any changes targeted to impact the 3% would automatically help the other 97%. Someone brought up what she considered a related concern, tracking at the high school level. She said she feels tracking excludes large numbers of African-American students from upper-level courses. She asked, ‘Who’s the community keeping accelerated classes white?’ She said he feels more comfortable alienating the white community than the African-American community when it comes to access to upper-level courses. The issue of African-American students feeling uncomfortable in upper-level courses due to their small numbers was cited. A taskforce member said it isn’t just ‘one community’ preventing access. He said the issue is larger than access to classes. It includes African-American students feeling they can’t play in white neighborhoods and not relating to white teachers. It was noted that under the Consent Decree one of the initiatives to encourage African-American students to enroll in upper-level courses was to group them together to form cohorts,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-10-13).
“The hidden curriculum in schools often reinforces society’s prejudicial view that Black children, particularly low-income Black children are incapable and inferior,” (Irvine, 1990, p. 8). Deficit attitudes towards students of color in public schools can lead to gaps on standardized tests and school report cards due to disparities in academic knowledge and skill (Ferguson et al., 2002). Teachers and school officials’ beliefs about their students matter for curtailing achievement gaps. Tracking is a means of segregating students along racial lines and allocating the best educational opportunities to whites over Blacks (Mickelson, 2005).

Two white female members raised the issue that student behavior sometimes prevents students from working to their ability. A Black male member asked for clarification and it was explained that sometimes kids can’t control their behavior, for a variety of reasons, or act our purposely because they feel they don’t fit in with the rest of the class, and as a result their grades suffer despite their having high test scores and high potential. A white female member asked: As a community, what can we do to assist students who either choose not to take advantage of the upper track or purposely sabotage their success in it. A debate of the merits of tracking ensued with several task force members voicing opposition to it. A Black female teacher stated she believes if tracking were eliminated, it would result in White flight which would hurt African-American students remaining in the District, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-10-13).

Tracking was a practice used in the late 19th century as a mechanism to teach immigrant students who spoke little to no English, and to whom school officials deemed poor and inferior from middle-class US citizens (Irvine, 1990). Lewis Terman was a founding father of intelligence tests and speaking of these immigrant students he said:

Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least in the family stocks from which they come. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew….There will be discovered enormously significant racial differences which cannot be wiped out by any schemes of mental culture. Children of this group should be segregated in special classes…. They cannot master abstractions, but they can be made efficient workers (Oakes, 1985, p-36-37).

Tracking is still used as a system of social and economic stratification that sort children by race and class. The poverty-based paradigm to the achievement gap is more palatable to explain
academic and disciplinary disparities rather than racial discrimination as the root cause of the
gaps. The national poverty-based rationale for increasing wealth and income gaps in the US supports prevailing deficit ideologies about poor people and the achievement gap (Gorski, 2012). Educational research regarding why the achievement gap for African American students remain is rooted in a deficit-view that says growing up African American negatively affects their academic achievement (Cooper & Jordan, 2009). It is important to examine the use of deficit ideology in public schooling because to ignore it can hinder the ability for the formation of strategies that can thwart disparities that require students to deal with inequities that should not be present in public education.

Tacking is used to segregate classes when Black students are tracked to lower tier courses and white students are tracked into more advanced courses. The result is a two-tiered education system that reinforces beliefs and stereotypes that Black students are intellectually inferior to white students (Irvine, 1990; Welsh, 1986). Data from the Office of Civil Rights (2015) for Blakesdale showed that only 8% of Black students were enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses as opposed to 63% of white students. Out of the 8% of Black students who take AP courses only 5% of them pass the exam while 61% of white students pass. Black students at Blakesdale had the same percentage of students (8%) enrolled in AP courses in 2011 but none of the students passed the exam. There were 61% of white students enrolled in AP classes in 2011 with 76% of them passing their exam. In 2015, Blakesdale had N=1685 Black students enrolled in the school district and N=1943 of white students enrolled. The data from the Office of Civil Rights show that the majority of Black students at Blakesdale were not enrolled in AP courses. The data from 2011 is important to note because that was the year Blakesdale came out from under the federal consent decree. The data also shows that although the same amount of
Black students (8%) were enrolled in AP courses in 2011 and 2015, none of the students passed the AP exam in 2011. There was a 5% increase in the number of Black students who passed the AP exam by 2015. It is reasonable to conclude that based on this data, academic achievement for Black students was worse during the years Blakesdale was under the federal consent decree.

Tracking is a form of educational malpractice and does not help students learn better (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Mickelson, 2005; Irvine, 1990; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1970). The perspectives and beliefs teachers have about their students matter. The race-based analysis of the achievement gap is associated with arguments of why public schools fail.

**Attack Rhetoric of Blaming Parents for Disciplinary Disparities**

Attack rhetoric blames teachers for public school failure. The degradation of the teaching profession has negatively the job market and has resulted in creating an unstable workforce. Blame for low achievement is also placed on students from low-income families by saying that parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds lack parental involvement or just do not care about their child’s educational well-being, places the problem and ways to solve the problem outside of the school system (Lipman, 1998; Dei, 1996; McLaren, 1993). Blame is a powerful mechanism for revealing sites of struggle and can be seen as a lazy approach to public deliberation (Hlavacik, 2016). School officials in this context can only be reactive to issues that students bring to school from home, but reject notions of racialized structural behaviors within the school system.

Mr. Jackson reported that LUDA (Large Unit District Association) and the OCR (Office of Civil Rights) asked District representatives to give a presentation on the discipline initiatives the District has implemented which address the goals of SB 100. He stated that despite the myriad interventions and supports in place, discipline data remains racially disparate with African American students receiving the lion’s share of disciplinary consequences. Caleb Williams responded to Mr. Jackson’s comments by laying the responsibility for student misbehavior on their community and families. He stated that schools are held accountable for issues beyond their control. Mr. Jackson stated that
although violence in the community and family factors are beyond the schools’ control, educators need to do the best they can with students during the seven hours a day they have them, including teaching behavioral expectations that may differ from the expectations students learn at home. Mr. Williams suggested that school expectations be presented to parents via ‘road shows’ in their communities and explained using scenarios to which parents can relate. One taskforce member suggested having walks in the community to share this information. It was noted that community walks had been held in the past to communicate information about attendance and Community Coalition goals. According to public imagination, public schools are failing at an alarming rate, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-10-15).

The real question is why are public schools failing and how do education policies exacerbate disparate circumstances that contribute to low achievement gaps (Perkins, 2015)?

A Black female member reported that sometimes students come to school angry, for very legitimate reasons. They often cope with their anger by fighting. She said one of the elementary schools has an after-school program just for girls to discuss how to deal with stress and anger. She recommended that this type of support be available to children at a young age because the indicators are there early on. A Black female teacher went a step further to say social/emotional learning needs to be a part of the school curriculum. Mr. Williams said he is leary about putting schools in the role of parents. He believes some professional distance is necessary. He stated parents need to accept their responsibility as parents and not expect schools to raise their children. The Black female teacher countered by explaining that to some students she is the only mother they have. She said sometimes she feels more like a mother than a teacher, but ‘how do we stop’ when a student isn’t getting what he/she needs at home? Mr. Jackson said parents can’t or don’t assume parental responsibility for a variety of reasons. Educators can’t control what goes on in the home, but they can do their best to meet children’s needs during school hours. It was noted that all schools have a small number of students who would benefit from social/emotional instruction done via small groups. Unfortunately, Mr. Jackson pointed out, these groups would be racially identifiable. Mr. Williams commented that the community is segregated, so schools shouldn’t be condemned if services are racially identifiable. He said he would support the concept of having separate classrooms in schools to address the small number of students who have more intense needs, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-10-15).

Despite how Black students perform in school, their teachers often ignore data that does not conform to their prejudices and stereotypes they hold against them (Irvine, 1990; Rist, 1970).

This is one of the ways schools perpetuate the maintenance of poverty and inequitable treatment of Black students (Irvine, 1990). Everyone has something to lose by preserving inequalities in public spaces that allow for public goods to become privatized. A popular idea about why the
achievement and disciplinary disparities persist among minority groups is based on class and not race because these students had a low socioeconomic status (Gordon et al., 2000; Maran, 2000; Portes, 2005). The poverty argument as the causal effect of low achievement and disciplinary issues is problematic. Boards have different views on what the possibilities are in terms of student learning and their beliefs about what the district is able to do to improve academic achievement. Mary Delagardelle (2008) states that the major difference between high achieving school districts and low achieving districts was that high achieving districts had more confidence that their students’ potential and they didn’t make excuses about what caused low achievement. She goes on to say that districts who were performing poorly were more willing to accept the status quo and the discourse of these districts reflected a belief that assumed the district was helpless to improve achievement because of excuses like poverty, lack of parental involvement, poor instruction, and the loss of “good students” to private schools.

Playing with the Data to justify racial disparities at Blakesdale?

“Mr. Jackson shared discipline data comparing last year to previous years. It was noted that the significant increase in suspensions from 2012-13 to 2013-14 was due to some schools improperly under-reporting. It was reported that expulsions decreased the past two years, in part, because of a new expulsion protocol that requires the administrative team at each school to answer a series of questions prior to making a decision to proceed with expulsion,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-10-15). See chart below that shows the suspension data by race over the last three academic school years.
The deputy superintendent Dr. Rachel Connell told the EEE committee, “You should not look at this data as racial. The main offense that cause the most suspensions is fighting. White kids are doing things but they are not as obvious as Black kids. White kids are not fighting at the high school level, they are just not! White kids maybe selling drugs but what they do is not something that is seen. The effect of racism and SES is now being added to trauma literature,” (EEE fieldnotes, 2-22-18). Dr. Connell is a white woman who sees herself as a consultant on race issues in schools. She travels to different districts teaching on race and racism in schools. Her rhetoric is the most racism talk in the EEE meetings. Dr. Connell’s rhetoric employs strategic color blindness which is a way of talking about behaviors that attempts to minimize differences and appear unbiased and friendly in order not to acknowledge that racism is present (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Sue, 2015).

A white female member asked why discipline data is no longer shared at DEA meetings. Mr. Jackson reminded the group that discipline data was shared first semester but that the focus second semester is revision of the Code of Conduct. He also stated that the data hasn’t
changed much over the course of many years despite ongoing efforts and implementation of various interventions and supports specially aimed at reducing the racial disparity. He said some people have voiced frustration with sharing the same basic data month after month, year after year. He stated Tier 1 and Tier 2 teams are supposed to be discussing discipline data at the building level but whether to share data with the entire staff is a building decision. Mr. Seawald suggested that buildings consider sharing discipline data via Google drive so that faculty meeting time can be used to cover other topics, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 4-5-16).

Rev. Jesse Jackson (2001) says that fear of our children is at the core of zero tolerance policies.

He says public schools should do more to empower students rather than punish them. Zero tolerance policies do not work and only offers an illusion that something is being done.

Table 2. Blakesdale Demographics—Race/Ethnic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RACIAL/ETHNIC</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Blakesdale School District

Mr. Jackson said an analysis of the data shows that 92% of all students in the District never received a suspension in 2014-15; however, of the 8% who were suspended, 80% were African-American. In contrast, however, in reviewing discipline data of African-American students on the whole, 84% of them never get suspended. Four percent of African-American suspensions are students with three or more suspensions. Although some on the committee believed this analysis of African-American suspension data shed a more positive light on the interventions implemented to reduce racial disparities in discipline, a
white female member disagreed stating that 84% is still not an acceptable percentage. Mr. Williams commented the students who do what they’re supposed to should receive recognition. He said currently, students with a history of behavioral infractions are provided incentives to behave while those who behave well consistently are overlooked. This comment led to a discussion of intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards and whether students can make the transfer from extrinsic to intrinsic, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-10-15).

Institutional narratives of deficit coupled with data to support that this category of students are most likely to not be successful in school provides a political account that justifies their failure (Fine, 1991).

Mr. Jackson introduced the Superintendent’s recommendation to reduce DRs and suspensions among African American students by 5%. He asked how this message should be shared so it’s not construed as, ‘Let’s allow the African-American kids do whatever they want?’ He then shared a ‘snapshot’ of Blakesdale community with statistics that showed increased poverty and violence in recent years. Mr. Jackson stressed the importance of discipline measures that are proactive, preventative, multi-tiered, and collaborative. He said teachers need to be reflective of their methods to ensure they’re making efforts to keep kids in class while also keeping the classroom under control so others can learn, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-15-2016).

Table 3. Total Expulsions in Blakesdale School District for African American Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Expulsions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Blakesdale School District*

A white female member noted that one explanation for the racial disparity in discipline data could be that the curriculum is geared toward the dominant culture and not responsive
to the needs of African American students. Mr. Jackson discussed the District’s [critical responsive education] CRE efforts and referenced Eddie Fergus’ initial meeting with all District administrators four years ago as well as the task force meeting with Fergus representatives in 2013-14. He said responses from administrators and task force members indicated they were not in support of a “culturally responsive” Code of Conduct as described by Fergus and his team. A Black female teacher commented that she attended the task force meeting and asked representatives for some data to show that culturally responsive student codes of conduct are effective in improving behavior and decreasing racial disparities. She said she also indicated a willingness to visit school districts using such a code of conduct. She said no data was ever shared and, to date, she had not been invited to visit any school districts where such a code has been implemented, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-10-15).

Culturally responsive pedagogy is not a panacea for all race problems in schools and with curricula. Racial tensions have been identified as a barrier to providing trauma-based care. However, a culturally informed trauma intervention can decrease the negative effect of trauma exposure to marginalized groups of students in schools (Ngo et al., 2008). It seems as if the DEA Taskforce assumes that Blakesdale schools are not sites of traumatic experiences for students. Their disciplinary data suggests otherwise.

A couple of committee members mentioned that this year’s freshmen group seems better behaved than last year’s and that, combined with teachers making better use of their ‘tool belts,’ has resulted in a positive start to the school year. A white female member shared a more negative, yet real, perspective of discipline data thus far this school year. She reported that of the 51 suspensions that have occurred this year, 47 are African-American, two are Latino, and two are white. Most of the student are middle-school age. Four kids have 2+ suspensions. It was suggested that discipline data be shared monthly with this group so that members have a clear idea of what’s happening in the area of discipline month by month. A white male member stated that the reasons for the 47 African-American suspensions are multifaceted. He opined that a student’s trust is gained more easily when the teacher looks like the student. He said many majority teachers don’t identify or understand cultural differences among African-American students. He said, ‘They’re noisier, their tone is sometime not good.’ A Black female member asked, ‘What’s ‘good’?” The white male member said the point he was trying to make is that sometimes the teachers writing the referrals don’t understand or share the same values as their students and this difference has to be bridged. Another white male member shared an interaction he observed between a minority student and a majority teacher that demonstrated how past negative experiences can taint the way kids interact with teachers in the future, resulting in the student not giving the teacher a chance because he/she is expecting a negative outcome, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-15-16).
“[Discipline Referral] DR and suspension data comparing this year to last year was shared. It was noted that an elementary school was missing from last year’s data. Mr. Seawald reported numbers for 2016-17 referrals do not match the data the school has. Given these discrepancies, it was difficult to know whether the slight downward trend of DRs and suspensions among African-American students was real. The racial disproportionality of the data, nonetheless, is continuing. Mr. Jackson reported that in response to SB 100, all suspensions this year range from 1-3 days maximum unless expulsion is being sought. He explained that research does not support that longer suspensions change behavior.” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 10-13-16). However, when I interviewed Mr. Jackson in January 2017, I asked him about the procedures when schools do not submit the required disciplinary data each month. He claimed that this is not an issue, yet the minutes from the DEA committee meetings state otherwise. He wanted to assure me that Blakesdale has no problem with data collection or the reliability of the reports provided to the public (Interview data, 1-20-17). “Mr. Jackson reported that current discipline data looks positive with African-American suspensions going down 7%. The District goal this year is 5%. Suspension data submitted to the State will look extremely good since students who served their suspensions at ACTIONS will count towards in-school not out-of-school suspensions. Mr. Jackson noted that the data shared at the [Education, Equity & Excellence] EEE Committee will differ from data reported to the State since suspensions served at ACTIONS will be counted as out-of-school suspensions for purposes of EEE reporting,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 2-9-17). In July 2018, the local newspaper reported that five districts were leading for racial disparities in discipline that would soon lead to action by the State Board of Education. Blakesdale was one of them. For the last three years Blakesdale was flagged for racial disproportionality in all categories of punishment. Mr. Jackson was cited in the
article saying, “Blakesdale has been focused on improving discipline practices and creating an equitable system that supports all students. As a result of our efforts, we saw improvement reflected in the 2017 data, including a decrease in number of suspensions (48 percent). However, more work is needed to improve racial disproportionality,” (Local newspaper, 2018).

Blakesdales has remained in the top 12 for school with racial disciplinary disproportionality. Although Blakesdale is a micro-urban school district with \(N=10,095\) students, their disciplinary disparities make a large school district like Chicago Public Schools (CPS) with \(N=372,214\) of students seem more safe to attend. The superintendent at a nearby school district commented in the same newspaper article that “an exclusionary consequence, [of] out-of-school suspension is more harmful to a Black student than a white student in terms for further educational outcomes. That means that there’s some systemic and implicit racial biases in our society that we, as educators, if we really want public education to be an equalizer, that we have to take more active role in dismantling,” (Local newspaper, 2018). The chart below is the racial disciplinary disparity data reported by the State Board of Education for Blakesdale School District for the last three years. It suggests that there were no suspensions among white students in the district.
A superintendent of a much smaller school district than Blakesdale found themselves on the list for the first time and called the State Board to get an understanding of what the list meant for them. The superintendent said, “I’m not as concerned about the list as I am about the confidence of our community in our schools and our ability to treat kids fairly and justly and equitably,” (Local newspaper, 2018). Mr. Jackson did not express any remorse over being on the list. Instead, he talked about all the progress Blakesdale had made to reduce their disciplinary disparities by 48 percent. However, the data does not show the decreases in disciplinary disparities at all. The data presented by the State Board of Education show higher numbers than he reported in committee meetings to the district. The State Board is planning to put Blakesdale on a plan to help them improve their numbers. This issue is now under the supervision of the state.
What did the consent decree do to offer nuance to the race-based issues at Blakesdale?

Mr. Jackson shared information from the Lodi, California Unified School District where disparate discipline outcomes have resulted in a Consent Decree. He reminded the committee that our District was under a Consent Decree for nine years and despite supports and interventions implemented during the Consent Decree through the present, our discipline data continues to show major disparities by race with African-American students receiving more DRs and suspensions than their enrollment reflects. Generally African-American students make up 75-80% of suspensions and reflect approximately 35% of the District’s enrollment. A Black female member suggested schools go into the community to work with families to assist them in preparing their children for the challenges of school. She said more hands-on meetings, forums, or home visits are needed to provide family/parent support. She said District staff continue to not reflect the minority makeup of our enrollment, so non-minority staff members need to pick up the mantle to provide the assistance needed by minority children, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-15-16).

The lawsuit files against Blakesdale in 2001 which led to the consent decree cited deprivations of 14th Amendment rights, Title V of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, and the Illinois Constitution due to disparate treatment of African American students and issues of racial segregation. The plaintiffs in the lawsuit complained that African American students at Blakesdale were overrepresented in special education programs and discipline rates, underrepresented in honors classes and graduation rates. On January 29, 2002, the second revised consent decree approved by a district court was filed with foci on a controlled choice plan for elementary schools and educational equity. The Turner case sought to desegregate Blakesdale schools. Mr. Turner has been working diligently to convince school leaders at Blakesdale to come up with a plan to desegregate schools two years before the lawsuit was filed. Blakesdale leadership resisted efforts to comply with bringing their building into racial fairness and equity compliance. The purpose of the federal consent decree at Blakesdale was to desegregate their schools and guarantee racial fairness for African American students in the district. As Mr. Jackson stated, “generally African-American students make up 75-80% of suspensions and reflect approximately 35% of the
District’s enrollment.” The state of African American students at Blakesdale is worse today than it was when the consent decree was filed. The African American community no longer has leaders like Mr. Turner fighting for them in the school system. Mr. Turner died in 2006 of a terminal illness and the consent decree was released in 2011. The African American community at Blakesdale became weary of fighting and both parties wanted to see an end to the consent decree. The disciplinary and equity taskforces are requirements that Blakesdale had to establish as a part of provisions in the terms and conditions for releasing the consent decree. The race talk and control of these committees illustrate one the reasons why the consent decree failed to accomplish its mission.

The establishment of the committees have not changed the racial climate at Blakesdale systemically. Many of the educational leaders in the districts were leading before and during the years of the consent decree. Mr. Williams is a member of the DEA Taskforce and alternate school board member and he states, “that the community [at Blakesdale] is segregated, so schools shouldn’t be condemned if services are racially identifiable. He said he would support the concept of having separate classrooms in schools to address the small number of students who have more intense needs,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 9-10-15). His comments on the taskforce has always reflected pro-segregation measures at Blakesdale. As Charles Lawrence (1980) notes once segregation is institutionalized as a labeling device, little maintenance is needed. Any recourse that does not take into consideration the systemic nature of the harm caused by segregation will fail.
CHAPTER 5: “IT'S NOT ABOUT POVERTY, IT IS ABOUT RACE,” RACE TALK DILEMMAS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENTS

Racism and Special Education Placement & Policy

Before Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) more than half of the country’s four million children living with disabilities were not receiving a public school education (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Despite the benefits of IDEA to afford disabled students special education programs in public schools, these services are not equitably administered. According to Losen & Orfield (2002) with the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, inappropriate practices in both general and special education classrooms result in the overrepresentation, misclassification, and hardships of African American students. Dr. Wendy Carson, the director for special education programs at Blakesdale School District presented her report on special education services to the Equity & Education Committee (EEC) in April 2017. She seemed sad and reluctant to present. She began her presentation by saying that she wanted everyone to know that the findings in her report were about “race not poverty.” She said that there was no system used in her data that could assess for these confounding issues. Concepts of risk and deficit are constructed through race talk that reveal structural practices of inequities and harm (Brown, 2016). Socio-historical patterns of confounding issues exist both inside and outside of Blakesdale schools that contribute to the under achievement and structural displacement of African American students from their educational opportunity. Racial identities are categories that cause disadvantages and discrimination. The way society responds to racial identity and difference is problematic and vital to understanding deep inequities historically in social arrangements in U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). She went through the five categories of special education programs they have and how Black students were
disproportionately represented in the data. Dr. Carson kept repeating, “Remember, the outcomes are about race not poverty.”

Finally, after she said that for the 5th time the NAACP representative asked her what she meant by that. She said that she used the free and reduced lunch (FRL) application data to determine poverty levels. She said that her data reflected that Black students were overrepresented in special education programs because of racial issues and not poverty. The NAACP representative asked if she could provide a statistical analysis that could show that information. She said, “It sounds like you are asking for something like a regression analysis and I don’t know how to do that. I wouldn’t even know how to operate the software to produce something like that. We could probably find someone down the road who can do it.” (Referring to the local university) She announced that the district had received a citation from the state because of the consistent overrepresentation of Black students over the last few years. The state required the school district to submit a self-assessment along with other documents. Committee members were surprised at this news and asked if she could share with them copies of the citation from the state,” (EEC meeting observation memo, 4-27-17).

Critical discussions of race and racism seldom move beyond descriptive data analysis about racial groups. The issues of race are mentioned in ways that do not disrupt the socio-cultural forces that created them. School and neighborhood segregation contribute to the racialized outcomes that place whites in positions of dominance and privilege to ensure their academic and economic success (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). “The committee members and public attendees at the EEC meetings are mostly white women. Racially, everyone involved is either white or Black. This is important to note because this is how discourse of equity and educational programming for other racial groups are silenced. They
do not have representation to voice their concerns about the issues going on with those students or contest deficit narratives spoken about them at the meetings,” (EEC meeting observation memo, 4-27-17). When there is discussion of conflict among racialized groups these conflicts are framed as race relations that mainly framed in terms of Black and white people (Darder & Torres, 2011). Donna Le Court (2004) believes when volatile racial events occur, race becomes more important than local interracial relationships. Alliances are called into question even though seemingly an interracial partnership existed to fight against systemic oppression. She posits that discursively identity is created and through this discourse white power becomes visible when it is contested. Race talk reveals how categories of value, who is included or excluded from spaces, and the distribution of resources and power intersect with identity politics (Hennessy, 1993). Whiteness is operationalized through special education policies and practices at Blakesdale that funnel African American students into educational experiences that limit their educational opportunities. This practice places African American students in the category of “at-risk” which results in a systemic pattern of inequitable treatment at school and results in the formation of an “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) for these students long term while maintaining the sustainability of white supremacy (Brown, 2016). The “at-risk” label functions as a label for students of color that ensures that they will receive the lowest quality education and the highest amount of discrimination and disadvantage the school system has to offer.

Voulgarides and Tefera (2017) suggests that attempting to mandate equity and reduce racially disproportionality in special education programs is not sufficient in reducing racialized practices. They recommend examining the racial ideologies of practitioners to limit educational inequity. Karolyn Tyson (2011) views the disproportionate placement of students of color into special education programs as a form of tracking that is basically segregation. She believes that
public educational institutions should level social differences instead of openly using those differences to track students of color into programs that limit their educational opportunity. Dr. Rachel Connell the deputy superintendent for Blakesdale says she believes the issue is with students who move to Blakesdale from Chicago and Latin America. (migrant workers) The data report showed that Asian students are highly represented in the category for autism. Nothing was said about these students. All other racial groups were not discussed. Dr. Carson went on to say that autism is not medically identified but assessed educationally. [This means that educational staff are tasked with making the determination of whether a child is autistic and not medical professionals.] Monica Simms who is a licensed social worker asked about how students over all of the special education categories were assessed. Dr. Carson said that all special education assessments were educationally identified and that the state did not require mental and medical health professional to make those assessments. Monica said that she knows of several case studies where school districts with a similar makeup of Blakesdale were able to transform how they approached their special education programs. Dr. Connell contested her remarks. She said that Blakesdale was unique and that no other school district she knew of and she said she knew of many, who were facing the same challenges as Blakesdale. She said that ‘you can’t compare apples and oranges.’ Anyone who attempted to offer positive suggestions for special education interventions were met with a counter argument from her. Here is an example of what is known as symbolic compliance. Symbolic compliance happens when local actors acknowledge and agree to follow policy mandates such as IDEA without making substantive changes to practices (Voulgarides & Tefera, 2017; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Dr. Carson reported to the committee that the findings from her report on the overrepresentation of African American students in the district was due to “race not poverty.” Dr. Connell resisted Dr. Carson’s assertion that racism
was an issue. When Monica mentioned that she had case studies of school districts who were able to improve their special education programs, Dr. Connell said “that Blakesdale was unique and that no other school district she knew of and she said she knew of many, who were facing the same challenges as Blakesdale.” Dr. Connell refused to engage with the idea that racism was a problem in the special education programs at Blakesdale.

Dr. Connell’s remarks reveal the limitations of policy mandates to address educational problems like disproportionality. Policy mandates do not consider how the ideology of local school officials circumvent how policy mandates are applied across multiple socio-cultural contexts (Voulgarides & Tefera, 2017; Tefera et al., 2017). Dr. Connell was aggressive about defending her deficit views of students of color and shifting the blame for low student achievement on student mobility specifically from Chicago and Latin America. These students represent the worse of the students in the school district in her opinion and she blames them for driving down the achievement ratings at Blakesdale. It is difficult to dictate equity policies because of how subjective concepts are interpreted when applied to practice (Edelman et al., 2011). Edelman and colleagues believe equity policies provide abstract guidelines to ensure and enforce adherence. IDEA is an example of an equity policy that is unclear regarding its foundational supposition of purpose, thus making it hard to regulate.

The Intersection of Zero-Tolerance Policies and Special Education Programs at Blakesdale

During my interview with school board member Dr. Robin Davis, I asked her about her thoughts regarding Blakesdale’s use of special education programs for disciplinary purposes (Interview data, 3-7-18).

Serena: How do you feel about the district’s special education programs being used for disciplinary measures?
Dr. Davis: Julie Tanner is a member of the board who has a special needs daughter and would have a lot to say about this. I mean she ran on this issue.

Dr. Davis was surprised by my question, but quickly referenced another school board member who has a daughter in the district with special needs. Julie Tanner and her daughter are white females. Special education classrooms at Blakesdale are racially segregated. Dr. Davis as well as Julie Tanner are extremely aware of the disproportionality of African American students in special education programs.

Mr. Jackson reported that he has noticed an uptick in DRs [discipline referrals] and suspensions at the K-1 levels. He said there are a few classrooms in the district with some very high needs students who do not qualify for special ed. services because they are ‘conduct disorder’ rather than ‘emotional disorder.’ He gave some examples of the types of behaviors they are displaying which were extremely disruptive and/or violent. He asked the group to brainstorm ideas for ways to support these students, their classmates whose learning is being severely disrupted, and the teachers attempting to meet the needs of all the students in the class. Someone asked if these types of students are being sent to the ACTIONS Program and what impact it was having on their behavior. Mr. Jackson reported that some of the students have gone to ACTIONS where they continued their aggressive behavior to the point that a restraint, SASS call, and/or police action have been needed. Mr. Jackson reported that even staff who have special education backgrounds, aren’t sure how to deal with these regular education students who are displaying Level 3 needs. Mr. Seawald asked if the District would consider having a regular ed. behavioral alternative program for elementary students since interventions in the regular school setting are not working for this small group of students. Mr. Jackson said, ‘Possibly.’ Mr. Jackson reported that if the District decided to create such a program, it would be racially identifiable and consist mainly of African-American males. A white female committee member said if an alternative school is run properly and provides the therapeutic supports necessary for the students’ individual needs, the race of the students should be immaterial. Mr. Seawald went so far as to say denying needed services to students based on race is virtually criminal. Ms. Wright fears that students with severe conduct disorders will drive other families away from Blakesdale if these students’ needs are not addressed, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 11-14-13).

When Mr. Jackson talks about the increase in DRs and suspensions for K-1 level students “He said there are a few classrooms in the district with some very high needs students who do not qualify for special education services because they are “conduct disorder” rather than “emotional disorder.” Mr. Jackson is noting that because of the language used to describe the conduct of
students who are being suspended and referred to the office for punishment is a barrier for placing them in special education classes. Special education programs are designed to serve students with disabilities and these programs are not supposed to be used as spaces for racial segregation of students because of race, class, or gender (Losen & Welner, 2001). Some scholars note that the reason for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs has to do with flawed referral processes, socioeconomic discrimination, cultural differences, and gaps in teacher training (Harry & Anderson, 1995; Oswald et al., 1999; Pitre, 2009; Patton, 1998). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997) says that more work needs to be done around the problem of misclassifying students for special education services because it leads to higher dropout rates, and students being segregated and inadequately served at school. Inappropriate referrals to special education classes contribute largely to the number of African American students placed in those classes (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Patton, 1998; Pitre, 2009). “Mr. Jackson reported that even staff who have special education backgrounds, aren’t sure how to deal with these regular education students who are displaying Level 3 needs. Mr. Seawald asked if the District would consider having a regular education behavioral alternative program for elementary students since interventions in the regular school setting are not working for this small group of students. Mr. Jackson said, “Possibly.” Mr. Jackson reported that if the District decided to create such a program, it would be racially identifiable and consist mainly of African-American males.” Mr. Jackson reveals that teachers who have special education backgrounds are unsure about how to deal with disruptive students who are in regular education programs. Gender bias in assessments and referral processes to special education programs have been suggested as a possible cause for disparity among more African American males than girls (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).
The opinions of teachers about which students need special education suggests how gender-bias for boys occur, especially since the teaching profession is predominately white females who may be more prone to have lower expectations girls behavior and achievement than boys (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). “A white female committee member said if an alternative school is run properly and provides the therapeutic supports necessary for the students’ individual needs, the race of the students should be immaterial. Mr. Seawald went so far as to say denying needed services to students based on race is virtually criminal. Ms. Wright fears that students with severe conduct disorders will drive other families away from Blakesdale if these students’ needs are not addressed,” (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 11-14-13).

This vignette reveals that the actual concern for students with severe conduct disorders will drive other families away from Blakesdale if the problem of these students’ needs are not addressed. The “other families” that Ms. Wright (an African American teacher at Blakesdale) is concerned with are white middle-class people who could possibly decide to leave the school district if this problem of students with severe conduct is not addressed.

The race talk in the master narrative of this discussion draws on risk discourse to make sense of who is causing problems in the classroom and how these problems could escalate into a situation where white flight of more affluent white families from the district could occur. Findings from reach conducted by Brown (2016) and Skiba et al. (2006) show that teachers with more experience in the classroom felt confident that their years of experience would enable them to make better accurate assessments about student’s academic ability and academic risk. However, when assessing students who were already labeled at-risk, the teachers formed racial stereotypical ideas of risk that were also socially classed and gendered. Teachers used a mixture of cultural deficit and institutional explanations for why students who were labeled at-risk were
low-achieving by blaming families from low-income backgrounds for being too poor to support their children in their academic endeavors. The ideology of teachers at Blakesdale regarding disadvantaged populations is vital to center in this context because assessments for special education placements are identified educationally not medically. Essentially, it is at the discretion of school officials at Blakesdale to determine who is placed in special education programs and why.

The discussion by the DEA Taskforce regarding “severe student conduct” and the possibility of an alternative school program for “these type of students” suggests that segregation is viewed as a necessary tool to displace undesirable students from the general population of students in the school district. The Taskforce had a conversation about the kinds of disciplinary behaviors students were exhibiting and the ways in which the students were being punished.

Mr. Jackson reported that the Code [of Conduct] clearly delineates which offenses call for a Level 1 referral and which ones are eligible for a Level 2 referral. He suggested that teachers who are experiencing this concern bring it to Building Council or to their union steward if they have already discussed it with their building principal. Mr. Seawald suggested that schools have a T-chart which clearly identifies which behaviors are to be handled by teachers and which ones are to be handled by administrators. He said this type of chart has been very helpful at his campus. One member reported that in one instance this concern was brought to a principal and the teacher was told, ‘Too bad. It’s done,’ (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 4-5-2016).

At another DEA Taskforce meeting, a discussion about district expectation for student conduct occurred.

[We should] examine intersection of culture and school expectations – Some individuals found the wording of this bullet point a bit unclear, but examples of ways in which the “intersection” is being examined included: Second Step instruction and Tier 2 groups at CECC (and other campuses as well). How does a cultural perspective affect instruction and management? –The example of an African-American student rolling his/her eyes at the teacher and the teacher’s response to this behavior was discussed. Ms. Wright noted that she ignores this behavior. Another person said it might be addressed with a Level 1 referral if it was perceived by the teacher as disrespect. A white female committee member brought up a counter argument about the teacher’s right to have his/her culture respected, if the
teacher’s culture considers the behavior disrespectful. She asked, ‘Whose behavior do you respect,’ (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 11-14-13)?

Research reveals that when teachers misunderstand the reactions of students’ culturally conditioned behaviors, it can lead to low academic achievement and social failure (Boykin & Bailey, 2000; Gay, 2000; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Pitre, 2009; Kunjufu, 2005).

They also discussed questions related to suspension letters, the Board’s new responsibilities with regard to expulsions, and the feasibility of developing an internal document to guide administrators in determining behavioral consequences in light of SB 100. The group read this summary silently and then discussed. It was clarified that in cases where administrators automatically recommended expulsion in the past, they can still recommend expulsion but are not obligated to since that would constitute ‘zero tolerance.’ Blakesdale’s attorney also advised against developing any type of internal document to guide administrative decision making in regard to disciplinary consequences since SB 100 is clear that each situation is to be considered on an individual basis, (DEA Taskforce meeting minutes, 4-5-2016).

The conversations bring to light how zero tolerance policies are negotiated to label and punish students of color at Blakesdale. The narratives around disproportionality in discipline and special education programs for African American students is grounded in the conditions that establish and sustain inequitable societal relations based on race, class, disability, and gender in the United States. Students who are labeled at-risk receive this classification because of how their bodies and ways of knowing are not aligned with white, normative values (Grant et al., 2016). These circumstances are situated in the cultural logic and systemic practices that historically reinforce white supremacy politically, socioeconomically and culturally (Goldsby, 2006). Risk discourse is used to maintain the operationalization of white supremacy institutionally. As school board member Dr. Davis says, “Black kids get treated as adults when white kids get treated as kids.” Deficit ideology shapes individual assumptions about marginalized people and becomes institutionalized to encourage adherence with oppressive school climates (Gorski, 2015). Deficit
ideology’s purpose is used to justify practices of inequality by assigning supposed traits of deviance and deficiencies to disadvantaged people and the communities where they live (Brandon, 2003; Gorski, 2015; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Race talk at Blakesdale is used to assign deficit views on vulnerable African American students and their families. At this juncture, issues of race, class, gender, and disability collide with institutional norms and practices of white supremacy causing intersectional fatalities for African American students in public schools.

Anti-Blackness and Poverty Rhetoric: Sense Making of Disproportionality in Special Education Programs at Blakesdale

During the EEC meeting on April 26, 2018, committee members discussed special education data for Blakesdale. The director for special education programs was absent from the meeting due to an illness. However, she provided written comments to questions raised in the minutes. Her comments are inserted in my field note transcript. The dialogue between school officials reveal how they make sense of the disproportionate overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs.

Ms. Newman: What does “0” in the charts represent? Are there zero Hispanics with Developmental Delays or do we not have enough to have a statistical number?

Ms. Woodard: No, that zero meant there were not students in those special education categories.

Dr. Carson: It means there are zero Hispanic students with DD. We use the federal race/ethnicity numbers, so our Hispanic numbers across the district are very small.

Ms. Bullock: When does special education come in a child’s learning life? What is the correlation between a child’s experiences with trauma and being diagnosed or referred as specific learning disability?
Dr. Carson: Most are 2nd-5th grade but we do see some initial evaluations at the middle level. We very rarely have students labelled with Specific Learning Disabilities at the kindergarten or 1st grade levels. As part of the evaluation process, we want to make sure that students have had sufficient instruction and that we rule out other primary causes of school struggle, which could include things like English proficiency or environmental factors.

Ms. Margaret: What do we know when parents want their child referred for special education?

Dr. Connell: Parents have the right to request that, but the district has a screening process and then a decision is made by the district if they wish to evaluate. Legally 14 days to complete a screening and respond to parents and 60 days to complete the evaluation.

Dr. Carson: The district determined whether an evaluation is warranted. Screenings may include activities like teacher or parent interviews, completing short academic activities, or conducting observations, or school personnel may review a student’s file. What is needed for screening depends on the issues of concern expressed in the referral for evaluation.

Ms. Margaret: How deeply are parents questioned when parents want to refer their child for special education services?

Ms. Bullock: Who refers students for special education the most?

Dr. Frank: Most of the time referrals come from teachers at the elementary level.

Dr. Carson: Correct.

Dr. Frank: Teachers refer students for special education mostly. Referrals should be based on data/assessments rather than recommendations from teachers or parents. [Although not the case currently]

Ms. Bullock: How long has RTI been in place?

Dr. Frank: about 3 years, but something has always been in place
Dr. Carson: It has been fully in place as a mechanism for identifying students with SLD since the 2011-2012 school year. During the 2010-2011 school year it was partially implemented as part of the evaluation process.

[Ms. Margaret looks at the special education data report with disgust.]

Ms. Margaret: Is there monetary things attached to your child being placed in special education?

Dr. Frank: Yes. They qualify for social services.

Dr. Carson: SSI is tied to disability/diagnosis as well as parents’ income and resources. Some kids who have IEPs get SSI and some don’t, and some kids who don’t have IEPs get SSI. The criteria is (1) child is under age 18, (2) child must meet the definition of disability, and (3) child has little to no income or resources (considering family income).

Ms. Margaret: See that is what it is! I know all of these students are in special education for a reason. The parents are referring their kids for special education so they can get the money!

Ms. Woodard: Teachers mostly refer students for special education services not parents.

Ms. Margaret: Is there a way we can find out what the parents are doing with the money?

Dr. Connell: No. We have no control over that.

Ms. Lanham: As a parent I requested services for one of my children.

Dr. Frank: Parents have to be involved in the placement of students into special education.

Ms. Woodard: Moral issues are connected to students being placed in special education.

Ms. Bullock: Is there something put in place or something being done regarding Intellectual Disability due to percentages going down? [Why are] Emotional Disability stats are going up?
Dr. Carson: *Numbers-wise, the group of students with ID is shrinking due to some of them fitting better in other disability categories – some autism, some specific learning disability. For the emotional disability group, some of that corresponds with the Pavilion opening more beds in their Residential Treatment Center.*

Ms. Bullock: *Related to disability, trauma informed schools is happening, how is that rolling out? Would you foresee an impact, as schools become more trauma responsive?*

Dr. Carson: *12 campuses have been trained, and we’re hoping to have the additional 7 within the next year. It is possible that there will be some impact on special education, but really we hope to see the impact more broadly in terms of achievement, attendance, discipline, etc. Some of that achievement may translate to lower disability identification, but I think it’s too early to make that causal connection.*

[Ms. Lanham advised the committee to watch the online video from the board meeting to view the report on trauma presented by Dr. Carson.]

Dr. Frank: *The district is undergoing trauma training to better understand what is happening to certain children in the district who are dealing with it. We are adding an additional PreK class [to one of our elementary schools]. (1/2 day classes- waiting list of 200 students now 147)*

Dr. Frank: *Our teachers have to deal with a social/emotional curriculum and not just reading and writing and we must give them more training on self-care and trauma.*

Members of Parent Community University (PCU): *Parents want academic, social and emotional support. They are concerned about violence in the schools and communities. [This group works exclusively with African American parents]*

[Ms. Margaret becomes angry and slams her copy of the special education report down on the table.]

Ms. Margaret: *Is there a time when parents will take responsibility for their role for the condition of their children?*

Ms. Woodard: *I think some of the conversations we have to take it to the communities because we can’t do it all. As a school, we can never say it is on the parents, but as a community we can.*
Dr. Frank: As a school [district] we are all in.

Ms. Margaret: I am pushing a lot of stuff for parents and children and I am seeing Latinos getting most of the services.

Dr. Frank: Summers are a vulnerable time for families who struggle. So our work never ends.

Renee (PCU): A group of Black female principals and assistant principals and teachers are building a program that incorporated culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) for 5th and 6th grade Black students.

[Ms. Woodard spoke about programs that are working to help students build confidence and academic achievement for African American students.]

Ms. Bullock: It feels like someone’s perception about research on issues of trauma should make some of the information we have in places where trust is less and could be presented.

Ms. Woodard: We do need to tell our narrative outside of our meetings.

Raya (PCU): Do you have a sense of where students go in the summer?

Ms. Bullock: Does the news outlets advertise our stuff?

Ms. Lanham: Not unless they can put a negative spin on it.

Raya: Do we have any safe space programs?

Dr. Connell: Only for 25-30 high school males through a basketball program.

Ms. Lanham: It is important to remember that the news reports on what they want to report on and not what they need to be reporting on.

Terry Pollock (2012) notes that informal deficit talk of teachers and other school officials about students and families of color is an overlooked aspect of school culture. During the Equity & Education Committee (EEC) meeting, Ms. Margaret, an African American woman and NAACP representative on the committee provided an explanation for why African American students at Blakesdale are overrepresented in the special education data by blaming their families. Ms. Margaret asked the committee if parents who have students who are in special
education programs received monetary benefits for their children being in the program. When members of the committee stated that some parents do receive some social security insurance (SSI) or public assistance for their children, Ms. Margaret responded by saying, “See that is what it is! I know all of these students are in special education for a reason. The parents are referring their kids for special education so they can get the money!” Ms. Margaret was told several times by other committee members that parents are not the main source for special education referrals and that teachers were the primary source of the referrals. Ms. Margaret’s comment shows that her explanation for why African American students are overrepresented in special education data is because parents wanted their students placed in special education programs for the financial benefits. Frequently held explanations about why racial disparities persist tend to reflect a deficit view of marginalized students of color that is legitimized through claims of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Pollock, 2012; Valencia, 1997). Ms. Margaret separates herself from the African Americans families she criticizes because she is in a different social class. She does not consider her comments as race talk because she identifies as African American and is a leader in the local NAACP chapter. However, Dr. Carson explained in a previous meeting that the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs at Blakesdale was not about poverty but about race. Ms. Margaret blames the victims for the economic and educational disparities they experience at Blakesdale.

Dr. Frank says, “Our teachers have to deal with a social/emotional curriculum and not just reading and writing and we must give them more training on self-care and trauma.” Ms. Margaret becomes angry and slams her fist on the table and says, “Is there a time when parents will take responsibility for their role for the “condition” of their children?” Ms. Woodard interjects, “I think some of the conversations we have to take it to the communities because we
can’t do it all. As a school, we can never say it is on the parents, but as a community we can.”

Dr. Frank responds, “As a school [district] we are all in.” Ms. Margaret continues, “I am pushing a lot of stuff for parents and children and I am seeing Latinos getting most of the services.” Race talk of school officials influence not only teaching and learning, (Bomer et al., 2008) but how resources and services are allocated in the school district. Ms. Woodard’s comment reflects the politics of managing race talk within the institution. Ms. Woodard is an African American woman who is the chair and assistant superintendent for equity and education at Blakesdale. Her comment suggests that committee members have to be careful about what is said about parents while within the institution. She says, “As a school, we can never say it is on the parents, but as a community we can.”

Race relations between Blakesdale School District and the African American community is fractured after years of historical and institutional racism. The uneven distribution of power between institutions and marginalized communities or vulnerable populations can lead to the reproduction of stereotypes and deficit thinking about those communities (Allahwala et al., 2014). Publicly confronting these deficit notions about marginalized communities is important in disrupting power and authority in knowledge creation within institutions of higher learning (Boyle, 2007; Butin, 2005; Cipolle, 2004; Gittell, 1969; Hess et al., 2007). Communities that are defined as at-risk or in need of repair often face the challenge of being viewed as those who need to be fixed or repaired by educational institutions, thus empowering the institutions with power (Cooks et al., 2004). Dr. Frank’s comment shows that she agrees with Ms. Woodard. However, what ideologies are revealed through race talk from their conversation is manifested in practice. The state board of education has issued a citation to Blakesdale for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

“[Black] kids are resentful that they are not accepted in their racial and cultural identity”: The consequences of race talk dilemmas on academic and disciplinary practices for African American Kids at Blakesdale

At the PIC retreat on February 10, 2006, educational leaders and Dr. Joseph who facilitated from Blakesdale met to discuss and review in-depth the issues related to the Consent Decree and think about possible solutions to solve the problems. Dr. Joseph says, “let’s look at the creative ways that we can problem solve, especially in those areas where we’re not making the progress we want.” Dr. Joseph provided four areas that would be up for discussion during the retreat: 1) creative and consistent practices around academic achievement, 2) discipline and climate at the secondary level, 3) creative input for looking at Special Education issues, and 4) teacher retention issues. Dr. Joseph suggested that the group look for evidence that the problem is occurring, when it is occurring and who is affected in any given area. The purpose of the discussion is not to lay blame or fault with any one person or group. On the topic of discipline and climate, Dr. Joseph began the discussion by asking the group to define the problem. What do you see that causes you [to] think that there’s a problem with discipline? What is a big indicator of this? General answers from the group were that the disparity of discipline referrals between the two high schools and the number of referrals and higher percentage of African American students. Some members of the group observed that kids fight in some places, but don’t fight in other places, and the group discussed what this could mean. There are climates that exist where people are more likely to engage in fighting than others. [We need] to address the issue of climate and what allows the kids to think it is okay to fight at school. It was observed that children may view schools as an area where they can fight “safely.” Another member said, “to fight safely at school means that there are adults around who will intervene and stop the fighting
whereas, on the street, or outside of school, there is no such protection.” One member said, “incidents like verbal abuse and insubordination are different from physical fighting; why our students at Blakesdale do not embrace our discipline rules as their discipline rules.” Another member shared a personal experience of being raised in an area where fighting was a way of life before and after school, but when she changed elementary schools, the idea of fighting before and after school was not part of the culture in the new school. “Our students at Blakesdale need to understand that we don’t do that fighting here.” The group noted that the district’s discipline policy was reactionary. One member stated that the reality in the classroom is that codes and policies matter less than having teachers that are reflective in their practice, knowing what will work for an individual student. Another member pointed out the need for sustainable training for classroom teachers at Blakesdale on how to handle issues before they ever escalate to referrals.

Dr. Joseph summarized several indicators for discipline and climate issues as, 1) a reactionary rather than a proactive discipline system, 2) lack of clarity in communications about the expectations for the school’s culture, 3) teacher competency and comfort with handling interpersonal relationships with a range of students, and 4) lack of clarity among students about “expectations for their space.” Dr. Joseph asked the group to switch from defining the problem, to thinking about the cause of it. One member challenged the group by saying that we are not willing to move from where we are based on the knowledge of what we know about kids. Another member observed that we as a culture and education system are still acting on a “factory” based school system. One member mentioned that the teacher turnover rate at Blakesdale averages over 100 new teachers each year. Dr. Joseph noted that one of the potential source of problems for climate and discipline is the teacher turnover rate. He said that this could create an environment within a school where not enough staff know and embody the culture of
that school. Dr. Joseph then asked the group to shift to brainstorming alternative or solutions to the issues identified. The group offered three items for possible alternatives to the issues, 1) professional development for teachers should include interpersonal group relations and cultural competency, 2) the District should explore partnering with mental health services in the local areas to assist families and schools to address issues of conflict, and 3) explore ways to improve teacher knowledge regarding the nature of conflict and their role in reducing it.

Dr. Joseph shifted the conversation to best practices for academic achievement. Some of the things the group defined as a problem for academic achievement for African American students in the district were: 1) low enrollment numbers of African American kids in Level III courses, 2) higher dropout rates for African American kids, 3) excessive absenteeism exacerbated by suspensions and expulsions, and 4) low expectations of teachers, parents and the community. Dr. Joseph asked the group what they thought impedes African American students’ progress as perceived ‘on the street.’

Some of the comments offered were that ‘Black kids don’t want to learn.’ ‘We’re paying too much attention to the achievement gap.’ ‘The parents don’t care.’ ‘It’s the family’s fault because there’s no support at home.’ ‘Kids say that they’re ostracized in the classroom.’ ‘Kids are resentful that they are not accepted in their racial and cultural identity.’ Dr. Joseph then asked the group to identify possible causes of low academic achievement. Some of the comments made were that there is a ‘lack of effective pedagogy,’ ‘need to place the best teachers in the hardest classrooms,’ ‘skills deficits due to inadequate preparation,’ and ‘organization of the school day to facilitate learning,’ (PIC meeting minutes, 2/10/2006).

One of the ways educational leaders at Blakesdale explains low academic achievement and disciplinary disparities of African American students is to blame their families and their community for their lack of success at school. Educational leaders at the retreat noted that structural and institutional perspectives of these factors are reactive instead of proactive. The discourse that emerged from the retreat reveal an oppressive school environment for African
American students where they are not respected or valued by their teachers and other school officials. Race talk at Blakesdale is used to assign deficit labels of vulnerability to African American students and their families. Race talk dilemmas of risk, equity, and schooling often view vulnerability as a pathological issue connected to racial groups who are poor, while concealing that vulnerability is also associated with privilege (Lee, 2009; Spencer et al., 2006). Issues of race, class, gender, and disability structures risks within school systems and reveal a cultural collective of resilience (Lee, 2009). Race classifications have always been centered on Black-white binary distinctions (Mills, 1997). One particular theme that continuously emerge from the race talk at Blakesdale is that “Black parents and communities don’t care about their kids.” African American parents and community members have always supported the education of their children historically by founding schools, providing financial and other supports to existing schools, participating in school boycotts, and using lawsuits to fight for educational equity (Anderson, 1988; Lee, 2009; Siddle-Walker, 2000). African American parents and community members at Blakesdale sued the school district that resulted in a federal consent decree that lasted a decade in an effort to fight for racial fairness and equity within the school system.

**Race talk dilemmas and the achievement gap at Blakesdale**

When one member of the retreat said, “we are not willing to move from where we are based on the knowledge of what we know about kids. Another member observed that we as a culture and education system are still acting on a “factory” based school system. One member mentioned that the teacher turnover rate at Blakesdale averages over 100 new teachers each year. Paul Willis (1977) notes that in education systems where an exchange of knowledge is used as a form of social control or where some students are restricted from receiving access to a quality
education within that system, social control is limited. These types of education models create subjectivities of failure in marginalized groups. In May 2006, the Superintendent said he visited a classroom of high performing high school students at Blakesdale and he noticed that there were only three African American students in the class. He said he noticed that some teachers had low expectation for the African American students and would rarely call on them in class. “If the kids see this happening it can’t be good,” said the Superintendent. The Superintendent said, “there are kids who are good performers, but they’re learning to disrespect children who are not. We’re actually in the process of creating social structures and systems of relationships that end up with African American and Latino children, and poor children being disrespected and disregarded by their peers. They [white students] know that they don’t get in trouble for violating some rules or policies. Those social violations have to be interrupted. It’s not going to improve just the academic area, but social and behavioral issues as well,” (PIC meeting minutes, May 17, 2006).

Dr. Joseph told the committee that they need to think in terms of what’s going to make the most educational sense, moving our district forward in terms of the quality of education. Historian James D. Anderson (2004) reminds us that the current focus on the Black-white achievement gap seeks to minimize the continuous successes and achievements that students of color and their families have made for decades. Anderson says the achievement gap is a racialized and discriminatory comparison that ignores crucial systems of inequalities that produce and maintain the achievement gap that is the center of policymakers and educational researchers’ debates. He asserts that the history of African American education in this nation is an account of overcoming different forms of achievement gaps with each generation building upon the strengths of previous generations (2004, p. 2).
Race talk dilemmas around disciplinary disparities and educational data analyses

In 2006, Blakesdale School District entered into an agreement with the local police department to have School Resource Officers (SROs) on campuses. Dr. Joseph asked the committee to provide baseline data of some of the current arrests and felony charges against high school aged kids prior to the implementation of the SRO program. He said that he wanted to be able to see if the number of arrests increased after one year. He said that he did not want to give the message that African American and Latino children are the problems, even though that is where the disparity is. He thinks there has to be an overall strategy of dealing with discipline problems in schools. He would be uncomfortable if there was a tremendous relaxation of efforts to improve the disciplinary policies in schools. (PIC meeting minutes, May 17, 2006) The achievement tradition in educational research has struggled with placing too much emphasis on statistical approaches that do not provide nuance of daily interactions in schools and how the research is connected to interpretive studies with a structural analysis for reform (Apple & Weis, 2013). When I interviewed Mr. Jackson in 2017 about a situation where African American parents complained about the arrest of 16 high school students from Blakesdale, he said that the students were the problem. Mr. Jackson stated, “generally African-American students make up 75-80% of suspensions and reflect approximately 35% of the District’s enrollment.” Back in 2006, Dr. Joseph said that they were working on addressing issues in the district dealing with kids who create problems by putting them out of the classroom and placing them to do special education treatment (PIC meeting minutes, May 17, 2006). In 2006, Blakesdale suspended over 1,000 students annually. African American students made of 70% of the suspensions. Currently, Blakesdale suspends more than 1,500 students annually and African American students make up 80% of those suspensions.
QuantCrit: Rethinking how we analyze statistical data in more nuanced ways for educational reform

According to David Gillborn and colleagues (2018), QuantCrit is a critique of how educational research uses statistics in ways that make claims that advance inequalities in schools by not confronting the persistence of racism and how statistics are used to disguise racism in education and protect white supremacy systemically. Policy as numbers is a term that describes how numbers as truth claims are vital in shaping how inequality in schools is formed, legitimized, and protected (Ozga & Lingard, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Rose, 1999).

Quantitative research is treated as fundamentally ‘superior’ to qualitative data (Gillborn et al., 2018). Linda Darling-Hammond (2007) explains that under NCLB, larger structural inequalities that create educational outcomes are ignored and the attention is given to schools. NCLB mandates that all students test at ‘proficient’ levels although more funding is given to resource the wealthiest public schools at least ten times more than the poorest public schools in the United States (2007; p. 8). Quantitative measures are used to validate that the data is relevant to social issues (Gillborn et al., 2018). By publicizing the data, school officials believe this approach is their way of being transparent by giving the public the opportunity to view and analyze it (Gillborn et al., 2018; Pollock, 2004).

A collective group of scholars of QuantCrit and Critical Race Quantitative Intersectionality (CRQI) seek to establish a framework that explain that “numbers have no objective reality beyond the frameworks of meaning and politics that create them,” (Covarrubias & Velez, 2013; Gillborn, 2010; Gillborn et al., 2018). Their work acknowledges the centrality of racism in society and that numbers are not neutral nor does data ‘speak for itself.’ (2018; p. 169). Race in statistical inquiry is more than just a variable (Dixson & Lynn, 2013). QuantCrit reveals how quantitative data is collected and analyzed in ways that privilege the interests, assumptions, and perceptions of white elites (Gillborn et al., 2018).
example of this is the distorted framing of the achievement gap. Achievement gap discourse is “also about the failure of white American students to meet standards set by federal and state governments, especially since the publication of A Nation at Risk twenty years ago,” (Anderson, 2004, p. 12). Another example of the relevance of a QuantCrit analysis in quantitative research design specifically at Blakesdale occurred during a PIC meeting on April 3, 2000. The committee discussed the design and implementation of a racial climate survey they wanted parents and teachers to complete that would inform program changes that would meet the OCR racial fairness guidelines.

Mr. Johnson said the reports should address the areas identified in the resolution agreement and equity audit, and should indicate what actions have been taken, specifically as pertain to disproportionality and equity issues in order for committee members to have a clear understanding of where the district stands on making progress in these areas and what actions are anticipated in the future. Mr. Johnson asked about the status of machinery and when recommendations to the Board could be expected, adding that the district should be able to show the sequence of data collection, analysis, recommendations, and any resulting implementation of policies/programs. Dr. Lane said discipline data has been entered and the district is working on enrollment information and will as another committee member to provide a demonstration of the data marts when the committee discusses discipline. Ms. Sikes outlined her concerns with the process used in administering the recent racial climate survey saying there is a perception that staff members may have sabotaged the administration of the survey. Mr. Johnson commended Dr. Lane for taking responsibility for communication breakdown of the survey. One committee member said teachers expressed concern with the meeting of some of the questions and that a ‘Don’t Know’ an option would have been both helpful and more accurate than either leaving an answer blank or marking ‘neutral.’ She said teachers were not told they could explain questions, which might have been helpful to younger (8-9 year olds) students. Ms. King said the hostile reaction is symbolic of issues related to race in Blakesdale County, noting surveys done in other communities in the state does not cause such reactions. Mr. Johnson said as an African American male [he] did not find any of the questions offensive. He added that Dr. Claude noted that answers to some of the questions were frightening, clearly showing the existence of dangerous racial notions in our community that need to be addressed immediately. Mr. Johnson said greater communication in the community about the reasons for the survey was necessary to rebut the attitudes that the district is being ‘forced by James Turner and another African American male community leader’ into doing it, claiming Dr. Lane did not state this as clearly/loudly as Mr. Johnson would have liked at the last Board meeting. Ms. Sikes noted that the appearance of resistance by teachers sends a negative message to students about the survey, (PIC meeting minutes, 4/3/2000).
Dr. Claude is a faculty member at the local university in the psychology department. He was brought in as a consultant to provide a quantitative study on the racial climate at Blakesdale in order to help school officials understand how they could address racial fairness and equity issues outlined by the OCR guidelines. Refer to Appendix C and D for a description of participants. The discourse in this episode illustrates how race and numbers are not neutral, but are intricately connected.

**The challenges of urban school reform**

What does the race talk dilemmas of school officials at Blakesdale about urban education reform reveal for school districts struggling with structural issues of race, class, gender, and disability? There are three observations I found from the finding in this study:

1. Urban education reform requires collaboration with stakeholders in other sectors of public policy to craft effective and sustainable practices. Housing and income disparities were noted throughout much of the conversations during school meetings held at Blakesdale during the time they were under the consent decree. Representatives and advocates for the African American community spoke often about the need to distribute better educational resources to the Northside of Blakesdale where most of the African Americans lived. The effects of segregation in African American communities travel to school with the students.

2. Race talk matters! The race talk of school officials at Blakesdale demonstrated how and why educational resources are stratified between students of color and whites. Educational leaders were aware of the color line in the school district and racist ideology held by teachers and other school officials prohibit the district from being able to offer equitable and rigorous educational experience for African American students. The race
talk of school officials at Blakesdale showed how educational leaders while under a consent decree resisted education reform that threatens their privilege.

3. The role of school resource officers on public school campuses facilitate the criminalization of African American students and structurally displace them from their educational opportunity. School discipline policies at Blakesdale exclusively target African American students for excessive punishment based on data.

Ray McDermott and colleagues (2009) note that circumstances of race, class, and disability do not exist exclusively, but are embedded in a historical tradition of U.S.-American culture of risk rituals. Risk rituals dominate U.S.-American life that promises freedom and equality for all but delivers hierarchies of privilege and oppression that puts everyone at risk (2009, p. 103). Educational research by Mica Pollock (2004) on race talk dilemmas in schools finds that race talk can reveal how silences are systemic when race is situated in a culture of risk in educational settings, it becomes a matrix for determining power and privilege distribution. Paulo Freire (1970) speaks of our struggle for human completion that if achieved would reinvigorate our confidence and commitment to oppose forces of domination and oppression. For Freire, freedom is the ability to be and exist authentically (1970, p. 33). Teaching and learning is a political act linked to the beliefs and values of the dominant class (Darder, 2017). Human beings are the creators of the historical oppression we have experienced in our world. The job of teachers and students is to engage fully in a dialectical understanding of our relationship with the world and develop a pedagogy that exhibits thoughts and actions to transform it (Freire, 1970). I conclude with only one recommendation for teacher and educational leaders working to reverse and oppose oppressive structures in public schooling. A growing number of scholars propose that we begin to insert love into our pedagogy and politics for every student who enters our schools
Chandra Muller’s (2001) research finds that at-risk students have higher levels of academic achievement and lower dropout rates in high school if they are taught by caring teachers. According to Russo & Fairbrother (2009), adding social justice education courses to teacher education programs allow pre-service teachers to make connections between the ideals of social justice and classroom practices and provide parameters for this work among in-service teachers helping them to develop principles that can guide pedagogical and curricular approaches.
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEiNOcQdWpU


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APPENDIX A: IRB EXEMPT APPROVAL

RPI Name: Yoon Pak
Project Title: How Education Leaders in a Small Urban School District in the Midwest "Talk" about Race, Discipline, and Student Achievement: A Critical Discourse Analysis
IRB #: 18430
Approval Date: December 19, 2017

Thank you for submitting the completed IRB application form and related materials. Your application was reviewed by the UIUC Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS). OPRS has determined that the research activities described in this application meet the criteria for exemption at 45CFR46.101(b)(2). This message serves to supply OPRS approval for your IRB application.

Please contact OPRS if you plan to modify your project (change procedures, populations, consent letters, etc.). Otherwise you may conduct the human subjects research as approved for a period of five years. Exempt protocols will be closed and archived at the time of expiration. Researchers will be required to contact our office if the study will continue beyond five years.

Copies of the approved consent form(s) (page(s) 26-27 in the attached, approved protocol) are to be used when obtaining informed consent.

We appreciate your conscientious adherence to the requirements of human subjects research. If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me at OPRS, or visit our website at http://oprs.research.illinois.edu

Sincerely,

Alisa Ortiz, MP
Human Subjects Research Specialist, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Attachment(s): Approved Protocol
C: Serena Koissaba

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research | Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
University of Illinois | Urbana-Champaign
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue, MC-095 | Urbana, IL 61801
Phone: (217) 333-2670 | Email: irb@illinois.edu
Website: http://oprs.research.illinois.edu

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
Providing administrative support, services, and resources to the research community and the IRB

"Under the Illinois Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) any written communication to or from University employees regarding University business is a public record and may be subject to public disclosure."
# APPENDIX B: Dissertation Fieldwork Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>#Pages</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| F 1-20-17 | 1:00-1:45 | 45 mins. | 6      | • Interviewed Director for Achievement & Students Services about disciplinary data and practices in the district.  
  • Mr. Jackson talked about the interventions offered in the school district to African American students and their families that are designed to curtail disciplinary actions against them.  
  • *(Interview data)* |
| TR 2-16-17 | 4:00-5:30 | 1h30m    | 26     | • **EEE committee meeting** at district office  
  • Data meeting gave the status on academic and disciplinary information on all schools in the district  
  • Data packet received*  
  • *(Observation data)* |
| TR 4-27-17 | 4:00-5:30 | 1h30m    | 25     | • **EEE committee meeting** at district office  
  • Data meeting on the status of special education in the district.  
  • Data packet received*  
  • *(Observation data)* |
| TR 8-24-17 | 4:00-5:30 | 1h30m    | 25     | • **EEE committee meeting** at district office  
  • Data meeting  
  • Data packet received*  
  • *(Observation data)* |
| TR 10-26-17 | 4:00-5:30 | 1h30m    | 25     | • **EEE committee meeting** at district office  
  • Data meeting  
  • Data packet received  
  • *(Observation data)* |
| TR 2-22-18 | 4:00-5:30 | 1h30m    | 25     | • **EEE committee meeting** at district office  
  • Data meeting  
  • Data packet received*  
  • *(Observation data)* |
| W 3-7-18   | 2:45-5:30 | 3h45m    | 20     | • **BOE member interview**  
  • Discussed district leadership role in academic achievement and disciplinary data  
  • *(Interview data)* |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| TR 4-26-18 | 4:00-5:30 | 1h30m   | 25    | • **EEE committee meeting** at district office  
• Data meeting  
• Data packet received*  
• *(Observation data)* |
| T 5-1-18    | 5:00-6:30 | 1h30m   | 43    | • **Social justice seminar** at district office  
• Sexual harassment policy meeting  
• Data packet received*  
• *(Observation data)* |
| F 6-8-18    | 1:00-4:00 | 3h       | 1,023 | • Archival research  
• *(Archival Data)* |
| M 6-11-18   | 9:00-10:00 | 6h      | 601   | • Archival research  
• *(Archival Data)* |
|       |           |          | 97    | • DEA meeting minutes (2013-2018) |
|       |           |          | 44    | • EEE meetings (2013-2018) |
|       | 24 total hours | 1,985 total pages |    | *Data packets received at meetings are included in the page number for data.
APPENDIX C: Blakesdale School District Participant List
(with titles and demographics)


*Due to a lot of turnover and movement with district staffing, committee and board membership, some participants and job functions change.

Blakesdale School District Board of Education Members

David Oliver Board President (white/male)
Julie Tanner Board VP (white/female)
Rebecca Newman Board Secretary (white/female)
Connie Lanham Board Member (white/female)
Dr. Robin Davis Board Member (Black/female)
Julie Tanner Board Member (white/female)
Robert Willis Board Member (Black/male)
Caleb Williams Alt. Board Member (white/male)

Blakesdale School District Educational Leadership Staff

Dr. Amanda Frank Superintendent (white/female)
Dr. Rachel Connell Deputy Superintendent (white/female)
Danielle Woodard Asst. Superintendent for Achievement & Equity (Black/female)
Dr. Cynthia Jones Asst. Superintendent for Achievement & Student Learning (Black/female)
Bob Brown Chief Financial & Legal Officer (white/male)
Michael Wynn Exec. Director of Human Resources (white/male)

Curriculum Directors

James Davis Director of Secondary Teaching and Learning (white/male)
Mark Bennett  Director of Elementary Teaching And Learning  (Black/male)
Ronald Jackson  Director of Achievement and Student Success  (Black/male)
Dr. Wendy Carson  Director of Special Education  (white/female)

**Discipline Equity Taskforce (DET) Member List**

Ronald Jackson  (Chair/District Director)  (Black/male)
Carl Rogue  (Member)  (white/male)
Lynn Jacob  (Member)  (white/male)
Caleb Williams  (Member/Board member-alt)  (white/male)
Sandra Wright  (Middle School Teacher/Member)  (Black/female)
Kevin Sheffield  (Middle School Teacher/Member)  (white/male)
David Seawald  (High School Principal/Member)  (white/male)

**Equity and Education Taskforce (EET) Member List**

Danielle Woodard  (Chair/Asst. Superintendent)  (Black/female)
Melvin James  (Member)  (white/male)
Dr. Mary Thomas  (Member)  (white/female)
Rhea Bullock  (Member)  (white/female)
Jill Sutton  (Member)  (white/female)
Margaret Jones  (NAACP/member)  (Black/female)
Dr. Pilar Cummings  (Member)  (white/female)
Connie Lanham  (Board Member/Member)  (white/female)
Rebecca Newman  (Board Member/Member)  (white/female)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Amanda Frank</td>
<td>(Superintendent)</td>
<td>(white/female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Rachel Connell</td>
<td>(Deputy Superintendent)</td>
<td>(white/female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica Meeks</td>
<td>(Middle School Teacher/Member)</td>
<td>(white/female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Vickie Law</td>
<td>(Former Superintendent)</td>
<td>(white/female)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX D: Blakesdale School District Planning & Implementation Committee Member List

(with titles and demographics)

Planning & Implementation Committee Members (PIC)

School Years (1998-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Turner</td>
<td>Community Leader</td>
<td></td>
<td>Black/male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Nathan Joseph</td>
<td>University Professor/Consultant</td>
<td></td>
<td>Black/male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ben Shultz</td>
<td>Educational Consultant</td>
<td></td>
<td>Black/male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtney Sikes</td>
<td>Community Leader</td>
<td></td>
<td>Black/female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Jason Claude</td>
<td>University Professor/Consultant</td>
<td></td>
<td>White/male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Amanda Frank*</td>
<td>Director of School Choice</td>
<td></td>
<td>White/female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Nigel Lane</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td></td>
<td>Black/male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky Dunn</td>
<td>Committee Member/Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td>White/female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice King</td>
<td>Committee Member/Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td>Black/female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Dr. Frank became superintendent of Blakesdale School District during the summer of 2017.*
APPENDIX E: Interview Protocol for Dr. Robin Davis
(Board of Education Member)

Race/disciplinary/achievement questions

1. Do you think disciplinary practices in your district or school are racially biased? Why or why not?

2. What do you think are the major problems of increasing academic achievement in your school?

Governance/Education policy questions

3. “How we structure local school governance tends to be problematic, attracting some people for the wrong reasons and giving authority over matters they have no experience with and shouldn’t control,” (Joshua Starr, 2018). Taking this reference into consideration, what do you think the possibilities are for your school district to create a more equitable board that is more intersectional in its representation?

4. How has your participation on the board of education shaped your scholarship as an education policy analyst and as a private citizen?

5. Would the board of education be open to instituting peer councils where students who break the code of conduct in the school district could have their grievances heard before a council of their peers and the council then make recommendations to the board of education or principals to consider for punishment?

Intersectional School Climate questions

6. The district data for achievement and disciplinary disparities show that marginalized groups of students, especially African American students are being punished and mistreated in the school district at disproportionate rates. In what ways can we rethink the ways in which the school district can be structured to become a more inclusive and safe environment for these populations of students? (e.g. new district leadership, additional training on social justice, difference and identity issues, decriminalizing the school setting by removing law enforcement)

7. Minority girls are being sexually harassed in high school and in some incidents the girls are saying the teacher is the perpetrator. Currently, there is an issue with DEA taskforce that is putting the question to the deputy superintendent as to whether the girls could drop the classes of those teachers who they feel are sexually harassing them. What are your thoughts on this?

8. How do you feel about the district’s special education programs being used for disciplinary measures?
## APPENDIX F: Phases of Fieldwork

<table>
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<th>Period</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January-April 2017</td>
<td>Preliminary fieldwork:&lt;br&gt;• Initial visits to school district offices&lt;br&gt;• Conducted 1 interview with the director for academic services&lt;br&gt;• Attended 2 public Equity, Excellent, &amp; Education (EEE) committee meetings. (open to the public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May-July 2017</td>
<td>• Data analysis of preliminary fieldwork&lt;br&gt;• Prepare dissertation proposal for IRB exemption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August-December 2017</td>
<td>• Attend scheduled meetings of EEE&lt;br&gt;• Submitted and received IRB approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January-April 2018</td>
<td>• Attended final three scheduled meetings of EEE and social justice committee&lt;br&gt;• Conducted interview with Dr. Robin Davis school board member&lt;br&gt;• Retrieved archival data&lt;br&gt;• Conclude data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>• Preliminary dissertation proposal defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2018-March 2019</td>
<td>• Dissertation data analysis, drafting, and defense</td>
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</tbody>
</table>