

THE UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY: AFRICAN AMERICAN RURAL STUDENTS
AND THEIR ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the educational experiences of African American students from the rural region of Alabama commonly known as the Black Belt and how the resources they received helped them prepare and gain access to higher education. The purpose of this study was to examine how factors such as rurality, race and class impact rural African American students access to higher education. Rural African American students are an underrepresented population within the realm of higher education and their experiences are often missing from research. The aim of this study is to provide greater insight into the barriers rural African American students face accessing higher education.

Through individual in-depth interviews, this study examined the educational experiences of six African American students and their reflection on living in a rural community, schooling and ways they navigated the college enrollment process. This study adds to the limited literature on the experiences of rural African American students and college access. Results of the study reveal how rurality, race and class must be considered when addressing the college access problem for rural African American students.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my parents, Doris and Alvin Dailey, for your unconditional love and support throughout this process. I also dedicate this dissertation to my siblings, Alvin Jr. and Ava Dailey. I appreciate your feedback on my project and I hope you enjoy reading it one day. I hope you use my dissertation as a reminder that God will help you through anything you want to accomplish in life.

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I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Study

In the landmark case *Brown v. The Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled racially segregated public schools were unconstitutional. Some people argue this decision changed the landscape of public education and schooling for black students because now they would finally have access to the same educational opportunities as white students. Judge Robert Carter described the Brown decision as “transforming blacks from beggars pleading for decent treatment to citizens demanding equal treatment under the law as their constitutionally recognized right” (Bell, 2004, p. 73). Yet many years after the milestone decision of Brown, public education remains racially segregated and inadequate. In fact, some areas of the country remain just as segregated as they were before the Brown decision and in many cases, this has caused black students to lag behind their peers academically. For example, a 2005 *Birmingham News* series of investigative reports entitled *Held Back: Poverty Hobbling Students* revealed schools in rural Alabama remain the most segregated and are the least funded by the state. According to the report, students attending schools in these rural counties lack the proper resources to excel academically such as updated textbooks, labs and access to computers. Not having access to these resources prevent students from doing well on standardized tests and college entrance exams such as the ACT or SAT. As a result, students in these schools do not receive high test scores as students from more affluent school districts with the economic resources to spend on expensive ACT/SAT test preparation courses and/or tutoring. Not having access to the aforementioned resources not only prevents rural students from exceling on standardized exams, but it also has several other consequences such as limited access to both

colleges/universities, scholarship opportunities, and those students will most likely be overlooked by college recruiters.

The evidence reported by the *Birmingham News* illustrates some of the many problems associated with education and schooling in rural areas. The reports dismantle the romanticized view of schooling as a place of equality where all students regardless of their race, gender or socioeconomic status can feel safe, thrive, learn, be inspired and simply take advantage of all educational opportunities that are available to them. Additionally, it disrupts the myth of placing all students on an “equal playing field” where students just need to work hard, and their hard work will lead to even greater achievements such as recognition from teachers, administrators, scholarship opportunities, entry to college and the ability to simply compete with other high achieving students.

This romanticized view neglects the complexities of schooling within all levels of education. Robert Helfenbein (2010) describes schools as “very complex social systems that are bound up in a tangled web of practices that include connections to government (local, state and federal), community, historical context, economic structure and fluid notions of community, culture, and identity” (Helfenbein, 2010, p. 308). Sociologist Michael Apple (2006) concurs by describing schools as “sites of struggle” (Apple, 2006, p. 195). Christopher Jencks argues that “schools serve primarily as selection and certification agencies whose job is to measure and label people, and only secondarily as socialization agencies whose job is to change people” (Sacks, 2007, p. 96). According to Peter Sacks, “this implies that schools serve primarily to legitimize inequality, not create it” (Sacks, 2007, p. 96). In his book, *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*, Sacks provides sound evidence of how schools are not the great equalizers. He asserts that schooling at all levels continue to perpetuate inequalities

based on class. Sadly, these inequalities are often ignored and not discussed. Besides the absence of social class in many discussions regarding education and schooling, disparities based on geography (rural vs. non-rural) are often disregarded or eliminated from the conversation. The *Birmingham News* article clearly describes the vast array of educational inequalities students experience attending schools in the rural geographic region of Alabama known as the Black Belt. Also, the article illustrates how key policy makers continue to ignore the educational disparities within this region. For example, even though the series of reports were published in 2005 and disclosed many alarming statistics regarding the Black Belt, little or no action has taken place to rectify or at least reform education in this region. Instead, some of the schools in the Black Belt area have closed because school officials hope closing and consolidating schools will help offer more opportunities to students and save the districts more money. Unfortunately, research shows this is often not the case (Tieken, 2014). Although there are some benefits to rural school consolidation such as more course offerings, Tieken argues there are several drawbacks for rural students such as the potential for larger class sizes, longer bus rides, which can limit participation in after school programs and/ or sports, lack of individual attention from teachers, and rural communities receiving a loss of revenue due to school closures and consolidation (Tieken, 2014). Despite some school closures and consolidation in the Black Belt, recent Census data from 2010 confirm citizens in this region continue to experience higher poverty rates; lower test scores, higher drop-out rates and students are least likely to pursue postsecondary education.

This dissertation will explore the intersectionality of factors such as rurality, race, class and how they impact access to higher education by exploring the perpetuation of educational disparities within schools in rural Alabama and African American students' access and exposure to postsecondary education. In this dissertation, I will focus on African American rural students

by examining how the role of race and geographic context can impact their access to higher education. Researchers such as Helfenbein and Taylor (2009) argues that understanding geographic context can explain educational inequalities. Additionally, sociologist Phillip Foster was one of the first scholars to argue that geographic disparities contribute to the most prominent educational inequalities. According to Foster, “geography may be an important stratifier of educational outcomes and warrants further investigation” (Chankselani, 2013, p. 312). Exploring the complexity of geographic residence can provide a more useful understanding of the role of place with regards to shaping college enrollment and degree attainment (Byun, Meece and Irvin, 2012). Ellis (2004) argues that researchers need to be more cognizant of place in the everyday lives of children and how it can contribute to social justice efforts and improving the educational experiences of students. Therefore, this dissertation will explore how rurality can impact the educational experiences of African American students.

Statement of the Problem

Many schools in rural Alabama, commonly known as the Black Belt, remain the most segregated and are the least funded by the state. Johnson et al (2010) found that over 800 rural Southern schools with high poverty students receive fewer state and local funding per pupil (\$7,731) compared to non-rural schools (which received \$9,611). Additionally, instructional expenditures for rural students was less than the national average (\$4,373 for rural students and \$5,554 per pupil for non-rural students). Therefore, students in this area not only have poor access to a quality education but they lack the proper resources to be academically successful. Johnson and Strange (2009) found that rural districts with the highest poverty rates are located in the South, 59% are students of color and high school completion rates are lower for minority rural students because an unequal number of rural African American students did not pass exit exams or were close to dropping out. Schooling for students in this area is often a site of

struggle because they are often the forgotten about group and experience more educational disparities than any of other group within the state. For example, a recent article published by al.com lists the top 15 Public High Schools within the state of Alabama and no rural Black Belt School made the list; which is quite usual (al.com retrieved Jan. 17,2017).

Table 1: Top 10 Schools within the State 2017

Source: The National Center for Education Statistics

School	Location	% of Black Students	Free lunch Eligible
Loveless Academic Magnet Program	Montgomery	26%	29
Mountain Brook High School	Mountain Brook	3%	0
Homewood High School	Homewood	27%	281
Vestavia High School	Vestavia	8%	127
Bob Jones High School	Madison	23%	248
Spain Park High School	Hoover	25%	248
Hoover High School	Hoover	29%	533
James Clemens High School	Madison	22%	232
Florence High School	Florence	31%	420
Auburn High School	Auburn	22%	378

However, most of the Black Belt schools did make the list of “Failing Schools” which was released by the Alabama Department of Education (al.com retrieved Jan. 17, 2017). Each year the department releases the names of schools scoring in the bottom six percent on the ACT Aspire test, which is a standardized test administered to tenth graders in order to measure achievement. Table B in the Appendix includes the Education Report Card for the 2016-2017 academic school year for some of the Black Belt Schools compared to the top high schools based on Academic Achievement, Graduation Rates, College and Career Readiness and Chronic

Absenteeism. Additionally, research shows a small number of African America students from this region actually enroll full-time as an undergraduate freshman at a major research institution. The table below lists the enrollment of students from some Black Belt counties for fall 2016 and 2015 at one institution within the state.

Table 2: Student Enrollment from Black Belt Counties at a local College/University

Student Enrollment from Black Belt Counties at a local College/University

Black Belt County	Fall 2016 Enrollment	Fall 2015 Enrollment
Bullock	0	4
Chilton	9	8
Choctaw	5	5
Coosa	3	0
Dallas	9	7
Greene	2	4
Hale	8	10
Lowndes	2	2
Macon	1	4
Marengo	5	12
Perry	3	2
Sumter	2	3
Wilcox	2	1
Total	51	62

The public-school rankings and numbers above indicate more research should be done in order to understand the college enrollment process of rural students in this region and to ascertain what barriers exist that may prevent these students from accessing higher education and if those factors may have prohibited these students from enrolling at this institution. There are certainly

educational disparities within this region and more research needs to be done on this special population of students and schooling within the Black Belt. In order to understand and address the educational disparities as well as the challenges students from this area face regarding access to higher education; race, class, and geography must be taken into consideration and analyzed as factors contributing to the educational inequalities within this region. Thus, more research should be done to determine how these factors contribute to such a small disproportionate number of rural students enrolling at this research institution. According to Chankselani (2013), factors such as race, gender, social class, residential origin are often examined as main predictors of university access, yet spatial factors receive less attention or remain unexplained. Additionally, there seems to be little research regarding rural populations. Hence, more studies should take into account the concept of “place” and the idea of “rural” (Wilcox, Angelis, Baker and Lawson, 2014, pg. 1). Additionally, most research within the realm of higher education fail to represent or include the voices of underrepresented groups such as African American students from rural areas and their access to higher education. Therefore, hearing the experiences of African American students from the rural Black Belt will help educators and college administrators further understand the rural problem and learn more on how factors such as race, class and geographic region can impact rural student’s access to higher education so that this population of students will no longer be considered the forgotten group.

Research Questions

This study will focus on the following questions:

1. How do African American students who have attended rural schools reflect on their educational experiences and resources offered to them?
2. How did these resources help them prepare and gain access to higher education.

Significance of the Study

I can't believe it. A college recruiter from your university actually came to visit my students! We haven't had a recruiter come down here in years. They seem to forget about our little school and don't come to recruit my students, so thank you so much for coming. I hope I can at least send one student your way, but those test score requirements...they get my kids. They can barely get in and they certainly won't qualify for scholarships.

[Guidance Counselor, Black Belt High School]

The above statement was from a guidance counselor at a high school in the Black Belt during my first visit as their college recruiter. The counselor's statement reveals how often times students in this region are overlooked because of rurality and their inability to get high scores on college entrance exams. Besides being overlooked by college recruiters, African American rural students and their voices are often lacking from research. Many scholars argue that most studies often focus on improving urban schools, yet a substantial amount of studies do not consider the issues and challenges of rural schools, rural education nor the students attending these schools. Arnold, Newman et al (2005) argue that few researchers are even studying rural education, rural research lacks vigor when compared to other research and scholars receive very little funding to conduct research in rural settings. Additionally, Freeman (1997) explains African American student's opinions and reflections are often excluded from research related to educational policies and issues. Current research tends to center on the reasons African Americans aspire to attend higher education or ways to attract and retain them based on various models such as College Choice, but few have considered the experiences and heritage of these students (Freeman, 1997). Freeman argues clearly the current models are lacking. Therefore, it is pertinent that researchers and policy-makers include and better understand from rural African American student's experiences of what will work for them when it comes to policy making.

This study is significant because it will focus on areas that are often neglected from research: the educational experiences of rural African American students regarding their access

to higher education. It will also illustrate how the mission of some higher education institutions has shifted their focus from providing educational opportunities to all students regardless of their geographic place or ability to make high test scores to operating as top corporations focused on moving up college ranking lists and spending top dollars to recruit only “the best and brightest” students who often come from upper class families all while neglecting certain populations of students such as rural African American students. For example, a 2016 article by the *US News and World Report* entitled “Out of State Enrollment Rises at State Flagship Universities,” revealed an increasing number of colleges and universities are diverting their recruitment strategies to focus more on out of state students. This practice is increasingly common at state flagships, which purchase the names of high achieving students or use statistical software to determine the best geo-markets to recruit students from using information based on test scores and parental income levels. These tactics often create a divide between high-achieving students from affluent areas and students from economically disadvantaged rural areas such as the Black Belt. Therefore, this study is significant because it will analyze how factors such as race and place (rurality) can impact African American rural students’ access to higher education.

As mentioned previously, the notion of place or rurality is often not considered when addressing educational inequalities. Scholars such as Perna (2006) argue the notion of place is important because it can influence one’s habitus; therefore, dictating how students view their social space and college choice and enrollment. My data will illustrate the need to evaluate how resources are allocated in order to ensure students attending schools in this rural region have access to the same educational opportunities regardless of their race, geographic region or socioeconomic status. This project will provide a space for African American students from rural Alabama to share their educational experiences and how they navigated the college enrollment

process. Lastly, this study will add to limited body of research on rural education and African American students' experience regarding the academic resources available to them.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In this dissertation I will utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT) as my theoretical framework because it foregrounds the ways structural racism manifests itself in educational contexts. Critical Race Theory, which came about as a critique of critical legal studies, has the following four tenets: the notion that racism is normal and natural, uses storytelling as a powerful mechanism to provide the ways to understand, feel and interpret the necessary context, provides a critique of liberal politics and argues whites have benefitted the most from civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRT best serves as a conceptual framework for understanding institutionalized racism because it highlights the many inequities students of color receive in education. Through this framework, one can analyze and identify how these oppressive structures are perpetuating both obvious and subtle forms of racism. Ladson-Billings argues racism is often portrayed as an invisible element that permeates society. It is often avoided and supported by the dominant group, the white middle class. This supports the CRT tenet of racism appearing as natural and normal because "it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 21). A powerful component of Critical Race Theory is that it enables the recounting of counterstorytelling from communities who have historically been marginalized. According to Ladson-Billings, communicating the experience and realities of the oppressed is considered the first step in trying to comprehend the intricacies of race. CRT is useful for "unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" by foregrounding how the experiences of African American students are marginalized and silenced (Ladson- Billings, 2009, p. 21). Additionally, CRT can explain how racism operates in schooling through the

everyday practices of high-stakes testing, school funding, tracking, and the uneven distribution of resources and through the curriculum taught to students.

In addition to CRT, I will also apply Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction in order to analyze how inequalities are often reproduced based on geography and within educational contexts. Many scholars such as McDonough and Lareau have used Bourdieu's theory to analyze educational inequalities. According to McDonough and Nunez, Bourdieu's theoretical framework "provides a way for understanding how individuals and organizations interact, how dominant groups stay in dominant positions and how rational, thinking and goal-directed individuals pursue their own personal interests; yet manage to create and recreate social structures" (McDonough and Nunez, 2007, pg. 143.). Therefore, in this study I will use CRT and Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory as frameworks to analyze the educational experiences of rural African American students. By coupling these frameworks together, I will illustrate how inequalities are often reproduced through various practices in education and how they impact these students' preparation and access to higher education.

Overview of Research Design

For my study, I will use a qualitative research design by examining the narratives of African American students living in rural Alabama. This research design is appropriate for my study because one of the hallmarks of qualitative research is the focus on the lived experiences of the research participants (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). For my study, I aim "to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experiences of African American students from the rural Black Belt. Specifically, I want to know how they perceive, describe, feel and make sense of the educational resources they received and how those resources impacted their access to higher education (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, pg. 9). I will accomplish this through employing the CRT technique of storytelling. Narratives are very useful because they often

reveal information from groups who are often socially marginalized, oppressed, silenced or distorted by dominant groups (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative as a useful approach for understanding and representing experience. Thus, researchers can learn more about participants' experience by using storytelling. According to Vereen, Hill and Butler (2013), storytelling allows both the researcher and study participants to become more knowledgeable about the "the social, historical, and cultural influences in an individual's life" (Fabius 2016, pg. 429 and Vereen et al., 2013). Therefore, the use of narratives and the CRT technique of storytelling was used in my study in order to create a counterstory of rural African American students residing in a once popular geographic region that has over the years become increasingly invisible to college administrators and other key policy makers. I utilized individual in-depth interviews as my primary source of data collection in order to learn more about the student's experiences attending a rural high school in the Black Belt and their access to higher education. I used the interviews as a way to understand African American students' experiences that could then help answer the research questions. Marshall and Rossman posit one of the most pertinent aspects of the interview is conveying to the participant's the value and usefulness of their views (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). For this study, I recruited participants by working with a college recruiter, the coordinator of a rural medical scholars program at a local university and through the snowball method. Initially, eight students agreed to participate in the study; however, two of the students stopped responding to my emails or did not attend their scheduled interview. Therefore, six students agreed to participate in interviews that lasted 40 minutes to an hour. Following the interviews of each participant, I transcribed each interview and used NVivo software in order to organize, code and look for various themes within my data.

Researcher Positionality

Throughout most of my schooling, I was fortunate to attend magnet schools and had access to adequate resources such as new computers, science labs and updated textbooks. Due to this experience, I was oblivious to the educational inequalities students experience in rural Alabama until I became a college admissions recruiter. In this position, I had the daunting task of trying to recruit students from the Black Belt to a predominantly white research institution, which seemed to favor recruiting only academic elite students. I remember very vividly the first time I received the expected enrollment goals for each of my schools and reviewing the actual enrollment numbers of students from previous years. Being new to enrollment management, I was dismayed by the small number of students who actually enrolled (if any). I was dismayed even more when I was told to concentrate my recruitment efforts on the feeder schools and only visit the smaller rural schools in the Black Belt if I had time since those students probably will not get accepted at this particular PWI. I was very disappointed in this approach and felt I should have focused even more on my smaller schools. Therefore, I made it my mission to “make time” to visit the neglected schools and students in order to discuss the college enrollment process and assist the students who were interested in going to any college or university.

As I entered the schools in rural Alabama, I witnessed firsthand deplorable school buildings and heard stories from students on how they did not have proper textbooks or classes to take in order to complete the basic high school curriculum. In some cases, the counselors seemed detached from the students and did not expose the students to information regarding higher education. For example, some students mentioned they were unfamiliar with the ACT/SAT, test taking tips or tricks, nor had they visited a college campus. Additionally, several of the students I met while visiting their school simply did not meet the minimum requirements for enrollment into the university simply due to low or lack of test scores and/or grades. Not only could some

students from the Black Belt region not gain admission into the university, many would not receive any sort of scholarship money because most scholarships were “merit-based” and seemed to be awarded to students from affluent backgrounds who attended schools that were considered more rigorous and had the economic means to take some sort of ACT/SAT preparation in order to increase their test scores. Each time I entered a school in the Black Belt, I wondered why policy makers did not do more to increase achievement rates and ensure students from the Black Belt region had access to a quality education that would allow them to acquire skills necessary for them to just simply compete academically with their peers from other regions. Why were these students constantly overlooked?

The former role of an admissions counselor and exposure to university policies helped me to not only further understand educational inequalities, but also the role of race, class, place and the impact on rural African American student’s access to higher education. My experience in this capacity greatly sparked my interest for conducting more research on this commonly overlooked area that was once one of the most popular areas in the South. Also, this experience greatly influenced my data collection method because I desired to hear the students’ reflection on living in rural communities and their educational experiences.

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to my study by explaining its significance, guiding research questions and an overview of the project design. In the second chapter, I will review the literature related to rural schooling, African American student’s quest to access higher education, critical race theory and higher education and college access. In chapter three, I will describe my qualitative methodology and methods used to conduct my study. In the fourth chapter, I will introduce my participant’s narratives. In the final chapters, I will explain my findings and implications for future research.

Definition of Terms

Urban- According to the Census Bureau, any area with 50,000 or more people

(<https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html>).

Rural- There is no common definition of rural. In fact, the government currently uses over fifteen definitions (Tieken, pg. 5). The Census Bureau describes rural as simply as all population, territory, and housing not included in an urban area

(<https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/urban-rural.html>). However, scholars such as Tieken use the following definition of rural “a matter of commonplace interactions and events that constitute the rural lifeworld, a value mostly overlooked by the media and academia, and significance impossible to quantify. Rural is not simply a matter of boundaries. It constitutes one’s identity; it shapes one’s perspectives and understandings; and it gives meaning to one’s daily experiences” (Tieken, 2014 pg. 5).

School Choice- a market approach to education systems that gives parents the maximum authority and control regarding their children’s education. The school choice movement gained popularity as way to resist desegregation. Today, it is often considered as a solution used to combat failing schools.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) - Critical Race Theory is applied as the theoretical framework for this study in order to examine the subtle ways in which racism still operates within education.

Social Reproduction Theory- An influential theory developed by Pierre Bourdieu used to analyze and understand how dominant groups maintain their position of power. The theory is often used to analyze the reproduction of class inequalities and the stratification of the system of higher education.

Capital- Capital is often described as a form of power or one's social assets that can increase their social status in society. Capital can exist as a possession, object, attribute, or quality of a person that is exchanged for goods, services or self-esteem (McDonough and Nunez, 2007, pg. 143). Bourdieu identifies five types: economic, cultural, academic, social and symbolic.

Habitus- Habitus is the set of dispositions, attitudes, actions or perceptions of the world that is often based off one's social status or class position. According to Dumais, "habitus reproduces inequality because people in privileged positions act in ways to secure privilege for their children, while those who are poor see only a limited set of opportunities for their future" (Dumais, 2006, pg. 84).

Field- setting in which an interaction takes place with several actors competing for various resources. Capital and Habitus are key components of field that can allow actors or individuals to advance to certain levels in the game of life.

Misrecognition- a process that leads to social reproduction by accepting or overlooking various forms of inequalities or oppressive structures that exist in society.

Space- often used interchangeably with place, yet it is often overlooked when analyzing educational inequalities.

Geography- a factor that is often negated from most policies and practices; yet can impact education.

CHAPTER II: OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this section, I review the literature related to rural schooling and African American student's access to higher education. I have organized the information for this review around the following primary areas of scholarship: critical race theory and higher education, rural schools, African American students and the issues of college choice and access. The first section describes the origin of CRT, the core tenets and its application to higher education. CRT is a pertinent framework to begin my review because it provides the analytical lens to examine the many ways race, place and rurality intersect to impact African American students' access to higher education. Next, I provide a brief historical overview of the struggles African Americans have faced regarding schooling and access to an equal education. I focus on African Americans residing in rural areas because research shows they continue to face various barriers to education because of place. Rurality in the south has led to marginalization and limited educational opportunities for some groups. Upon the conclusion of my review on CRT in higher education and African American students struggle to access higher education, I move towards a review of rural schools, rural access and higher education and the various college models that are often used to understand access and college choice of marginalized students such as rural African American students.

Overview of Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT), which emerged out of a critique of the critical legal studies movement of the 1970s, is a useful for analyzing race and the ways it operates within society. According to Ladson-Billings, Critical Race Theory is useful for “unmasking and exposing racism in its various per mutations” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 21). Additionally, it is useful for understanding how certain groups are often marginalized and silenced by providing a mechanism

to analyze and disrupt systemic structures or racial inequalities. Ladson-Billings describes CRT as an “important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction of human agency and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19). CRT emanated from as an expansion of critical legal studies and when critical legal scholars, such as Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman were dismayed with the lack of racial reform within the United States in the aftermath of the Brown decision and other court cases needed to desegregate. The scholars argued that critical legal studies had several shortcomings, such as the failure to include race and analyze it within social critique and that critical legal studies excluded the lived experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups in their transformative vision of the legal system. Additionally, Critical Race Theory scholars criticized and questioned the American legal system and the ways in which it legitimized and perpetuated oppressive legal structures (Yosso et al, 2004, p. 2). They argued critical legal studies failed to offer strategies for social transformation because it did not include race and racism into its critique (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, 2005). Additionally, they argued critical legal studies often did not consider the lived experiences and histories of those oppressed by systemic racism (Yosso, 2004, pg. 2). Therefore, these scholars pulled away from critical legal studies, and critical race theory emerged as a method for “examining the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial and gendered lines” (Taylor, 2009, p.1). Since its inception, the theory has expanded to include the racialized experiences of other marginalized groups such as women, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Latina/os; therefore, creating the following branches of CRT: Critical Latina/o Theory, Critical Asian Theory (Asian Crit), and Critical Tribal Theory (Tribal Crit) and Disability Theory (DisCrit) (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) . This expansion of CRT emerged in response to critiques for groups who do not fall into the typical White/Black

binary. Also, these branches of CRT are important because they are able to analyze how various ethnic groups experience racism in different ways outside the black/white binary, but instead according to their own racial and ethnic identity.

CRT draws perspectives from several fields such as law, sociology, history, ethnic and women's studies. The following tenets are often used to guide critical race analysis and research (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015):

- 1) Critical race theorists argue that racism is a permanent fixture in American society impacting both the political and economic experiences of marginalized groups (African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans etc.)
- 2) Critical race theorists often utilize experiential knowledge and counter storytelling as a way to give voice to marginalized groups since often their lived experience is often excluded from scholarship. Therefore, critical race theorists strive to share their stories through storytelling, family histories, biographies, chronicles, narratives, metaphorical tales or testimonies (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Additionally, Ladson-Billings states "the primary reason stories and counter-stories are used in critical race theory is that they add context to the "objectivity" of positivist perspectives" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11).
- 3) Critical race theorists argue most civil rights laws and advancement for racial equality continues to support the interests of whites. Derrick Bell, who is often considered the father of Critical Race Theory, coined the theory by explaining minorities in this country only make significant strides socially, politically or economically when their interests align or intersect with those in power such as whites.
- 4) Critical race theory not only centers on race but includes the intersectionality of other factors such as gender, class, sexual orientation etc. In the article, *Mapping the Margins:*

Intersectionality, Identity, Politics and Violence Against Women of Color, Kimberle Crenshaw used the concept of intersectionality to explore the ways race, gender, and class intersect and form structural, political and representational aspects of violence against women of color (Crenshaw, 1991, pg. 214). According to Crenshaw, “intersectionality provides the means for dealing with other forms of marginalization. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (Crenshaw, 1991, pg. 246). Therefore, considering race along with others forms of marginalized and oppressed identities, critical race theory is often considered a very important piece of scholarship (Yosso, 2005).

- 5) Critical race theory also includes Cheryl’s Harris’ conceptualization of Whiteness as property. Cheryl Harris (1993) introduced the notion of Whiteness as property by describing the ways her grandmother was allowed to “pass” and enter the white world due to her fair skin, straight hair, and aquiline features (Harris, 1993, pg. 277). According to Harris, passing is not a new phenomenon. It is well known especially within the black community and has existed due to the many years of white racial domination and economic exploitation permeating U.S. society. Harris asserts her grandmother’s story and the issue of passing further illustrates how whiteness is considered a prize possession and “one that whites sought to attain even by fraud if necessary and whites have come to expect and rely on the benefits associated with whiteness and in turn these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated and protected by law (Harris, 1993, p. 277). Additionally, Harris argues the intersectionality of race and property helped established

and maintained both racial and economic subordination within this country. She explains the enslavement of African Americans and the removal of Native Americans from their lands created whiteness as a racial identity serving as validation for property rights and ownership (Harris, 1993). According to Harris, “white identity and whiteness were sources of privilege and protecting their absence meant being the object of property” (Harris, 1993, pg. 1721). Whiteness as property has operated within the realm of education. For example, education has often been an exclusive privilege with access freely given to whites over the years, yet African Americans struggled for the right to read and write. Additionally, once African Americans gained access to education, whiteness as property still manifested through various admissions policies, testing, funding, elite programs such as Honors programs and even school curriculums; therefore, establishing education as an “exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded” (Harris, 1993 pg. 1736).

- 6) Critical race theorists are critical of liberalism and oppose the concepts of color blindness, objectivity, meritocracy, race neutrality, equal opportunity and incremental change (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015).
- 7) Critical race theory is grounded in a commitment to social justice by striving to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression that marginalized groups often face.

Many scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Solorzano and Yosso (2002) applied CRT methods to the field of education as a way to analyze educational inequalities.

The next section provides an overview of Critical Race Theory and Education.

Critical Race Theory and Education

Despite the many court decisions to integrate schools and bills trying to create equal opportunities for students, racism still remains a permanent fixture within the field of education. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to the field of education in their work *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*. They argue Critical Race Theory can be used to analyze and critique a myriad of educational issues related to race (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). Yosso (2005) describes Critical Race Theory in education as a “theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses. It is conceived as a social justice project that works toward the liberatory potential of schooling” (Yosso, 2005, p.74). Therefore, Critical Race theorists aim to examine, challenge, and critique the ways race and racism shape schooling structures, practices and discourses (Yosso T., Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). Over the years, Critical Race scholars have used the theory to critique and analyze several issues pertaining to higher education such as desegregation, affirmative action, and access to higher education, diversity issues, and the experiences of students of color and Black faculty and staff within the academy (Powers, 2007). In order to analyze these issues, most CRT scholars use five common tenets of CRT in education to guide their research. First, Critical Race Theory is grounded on race and the theory illustrates how racism is a permanent fixture operating within U.S. society. Therefore, CRT research must focus not only on race and racism, but also on the intersectionality of gender, class and other forms of marginalization. In higher education, Critical Race theory is used to examine how the intersection of race and class causes several forms of oppression and marginalization for many students of color. The second tenet of CRT in higher education involves interrogating dominant educational ideology. Critical Race Theory rejects the claims of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality and equal opportunity. CRT scholars argue that these claims cause

more detriment to students of color because it “camouflages the self-interest, power and privilege of whiteness” (Yosso T., Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004, p. 4). Third, the apex of all Critical Race Theory research is social justice and the empowerment of oppressed groups. According to CRT scholars, schools are complex spaces that often send mixed messages to students and force dominant ideologies on underrepresented groups. Fourth, Critical race theory recognizes the pertinence of experiential knowledge. One powerful component of CRT is that it often gives voice to groups that are often voiceless by relying on their lived experience using various methods as storytelling, counter-storytelling, narratives, family histories, parables, scenarios, biographies, or testimonies (Yosso T., Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). According to Daniel Solórzano, the lived experiences of students of color become “valid, appropriate and necessary forms of data that can be used to understand racism and its affects within the realm of higher education” (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). For example, his study on the African American undergraduate experience at predominately white institutions utilized the method of counter-storytelling and revealed the ways racism and inequality inhabits higher education. Lastly, the fifth tenet of CRT in education consists of being interdisciplinary. Critical race scholars believe one must use several perspectives when analyzing race and racism; therefore, critical race theory should include viewpoints from other disciplines.

CRT is a useful strategy for understanding how racism permeates in education and schooling; therefore, creating educational inequalities especially for African American rural students. Additionally, CRT can explain how racism operates in schooling in several ways such as through funding, the curriculum, and accessibility to other school resources. First, one key area Critical Race Theory can explain racism as it operates is in the area school funding. CRT explains that the inequalities in school funding is functions as both institutional and structural

racism” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 31) Schools are often funded based on property taxes. Students attending schools in more affluent areas will receive more funding and will likely have better facilities, course options such as college preparatory or IB courses and access to better computer and science labs. On the other hand, students attending schools in a rural or high poverty area will be severely less funded. Therefore, students attending schools in these areas are likely to attend schools in poor conditions, lack access to challenging or college preparatory courses, and lack the proper resources such as updated books, computer and science labs. Additionally, students will likely have lower scores on standardized tests such as college entrance exams. Nonetheless, CRT challenges school leaders to recognize the relationship of inadequate school funding and how it affects academic outcomes between affluent and poor students. According to Ladson- Billings, “without the commitment to redesign funding formulas, one of the basic inequities of schooling will remain in place and virtually guarantee the reproduction of the status quo” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 32).

In the article “A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance,” Claude Steele (Steele, 2009) questions whether or not certain groups of students experience the classroom differently even though everything appears equal. In order for students to be motivated and successful, they must identify with the academic domain. Steele defines identification as "forming a relationship between oneself and the domains of schooling such that one's self-regard significantly depends on achievement in the domains" (Steele, 2009, p. 167). He argues the following are threats to academic identification: limited educational access and negative stereotypes. Nonetheless, Steele advocates for what he terms "wise schooling" which is schooling that recognizes students’ potential despite the negative stigmas that may be associated

with their academic ability. This technique could be implemented in order to assist with the achievement gap of minority students attending rural schools in the Black Belt.

In the article “Unspeakable Offenses”, Erevelles and Minear (2010) describe the need to examine race, class, disability and gender and the ways they all intersect in order to understand the structural forces that permeate in society. The article reveals how our educational institutions are problematic sites. Although they are constructed places where all students are supposed to be educated, protected and nurtured, this may not be the case if one is a particular race, gender, different class and have a disability. Students are then labeled and stereotyped and unfortunately this negative label will follow the student throughout their academic career. This article reveals how we need to apply a CRT analysis in order to prevent these dominate forces from treating individuals as dispensable, which can sometimes be the case for rural African American students who are from a lower socioeconomic status.

In *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009), the authors try to offer a more extensive version of white supremacy that is often normalized and/or taken for granted. They argue there is a need to view policy, specifically educational policy through "a lens that recognizes the very real struggles and conflicts that lie at the heart of the processes through which policy and practice are shaped" (Delgado, 2009, p. 52). The authors pose the following pertinent questions that all policy makers should consider: who or what is driving education policy. The question of beneficiaries: who will lose or gain as a result of education policy priorities? What are the effects of the outcomes? These articles and questions are very important as leaders make decisions regarding educational policy. Are they making policies just to maintain the status-quo? Are they only interested in advancing one particular group while neglecting others, specifically minority groups in rural areas? These are

key factors regarding high stakes testing and selection by "ability" which continues to be used despite the known detriment to African American students especially from rural geographic regions such as the Black Belt.

Leonardo argues “the conditions of white supremacy make white privilege possible. In order for white racial hegemony to saturate everyday life, it has to be secured by a process of domination, or those acts, decisions and policies that white subjects perpetrate on people of color” (Leonardo, 2004, pg.137). Additionally, he highlights how whites can often re-establish racial supremacy even though they may have good intentions. Despite the intention to make college accessible to everyone, the creation of standardized exams and changing financial aid policies is not only creating barriers for minority students residing in rural areas, but they are re-establishing racial supremacy.

Furthermore, Critical Race Theory can be used to analyze how racism operates within higher education through such ways as college entrance exams and various elite programs. This illustrates how colleges are simply employing subtle racism by requiring these exams in order to “support and legitimate America’s present class structure” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19). Unfortunately, policy makers often do not consider rural schools, students or their access to certain activities or coursework when developing these elite programs.

Critical Race Theory is useful for deconstructing and understanding how oppressive structures operate within society especially within schooling and education. Years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 decision, schools remain racially segregated and create several challenges especially for minority students. Hence, educational leaders can no longer pretend racism no longer exist or that we live in a post-racial society. Lopez explicates, “white educators and leaders do not have a thorough understanding of racism and its many

manifestations, nor do they comprehend the ways in which they are perpetuating white racism in their schools” (Lopez, 2003, p.71). Therefore, leaders must be active and take action regarding the problem of racism and one way of recognizing the subtle forms of racism in education is through the implementation of Critical Race Theory.

In this section, I have explained the definition of CRT and how it addresses the role of race and how it intersects with other factors such as class and geographic region (place) to impact African American rural student’s access to higher education. CRT can be applied to understanding the ways racism operates in schooling through various mechanisms such as school curriculums, classroom instruction, the college admissions process, testing specifically standardized tests and school funding. By allowing race to permeate within these avenues of schooling and education, African Americans and other minority groups will continue to be marginalized, silenced and will continue to struggle with issues such as identity formation, socialization and academic achievement. Hence, Critical Race scholarship is needed in order to dismantle the ways racism continues to permeate within education and will be applied to my research questions. The next section examines the struggles African Americans have faced trying to get an education in this country.

Historical Overview of African American Access to Higher Education

With tears trickling down his face, one old man who had seen slavery days, with all of his life’s earnings in an old greasy sack, slowly drew from his pocket and emptied it on the table and said I want to see the children of my grandchildren have a chance and so I am giving my all.

[Anderson, 1988, pg. 165]

The above quote describes the longstanding feelings many African Americans have experienced regarding obtaining an education in this country. Throughout history, African Americans have simply wanted a chance to experience equal schooling and access to a quality education since slavery. According to James Anderson (1988) in *The Education of Blacks in the*

South, 1860-1935, “blacks emerged from slavery with a strong belief in the desirability of learning to read and write” (Anderson, 1988, pg. 5). Their passion for an education was so strong that many slaves endured brutal whippings, amputations and even death since learning to read and write was illegal for many years leading up to the Civil War. For many slaves, education was very pertinent, and the term carries many connotations. For example, an education for slaves simply meant liberation and freedom from the land, cotton and other forms of agriculture. For Thomas H. Jones, a North Carolina slave in the 1800s, an education not only meant freedom, but also influence and a way to secure happiness (Anderson, 1988). Presently, many African Americans view education as way to increased social mobility and access to the “American Dream.”

Even though many African Americans possess a strong desire for learning and a belief in an education system that is sometimes synonymous to religious faith, accessibility and inequality are often key terms that blacks have faced in regard to obtaining an education since slavery. James Anderson has argued that Thomas Jefferson established the first system of unequal education in America when he proposed to the Virginia legislature in 1787 to educate all white children for a period of three years and to send only the smartest white males to grammar school and college at the public’s expense (Anderson, 1988). This proposed system did not include enslaved children, who comprised 40 percent of children in Virginia and certainly not their enslaved parents who contributed to both the wealth of the state (Anderson, 1988). Anderson states, “It is believed that Virginia’s peace, prosperity and civilization depended as much, if not more on the containment and repression of the literate culture among its enslaved population as it did on the diffusion of the literate culture among it’s free population” (Anderson, 1988, pg. 1). This unequal system provided the foundation for the oppression and marginalization of blacks

for many years. Therefore, it is pertinent to analyze and understand the ways in which politics, ideology and various hegemonic forces have structured the education of blacks and how their education structure differed from European Americans (Anderson, 1988). The educational institutions for blacks was structured so differently because white leaders understood that educating blacks posed serious threats to the economic, political and social order especially for regions such as the rural South (Tieken, 2014). They relied on and understood the importance of black labor and rejected the education of blacks all together. One reformer even stated, “Our great problem is to attach the Negro to the soil and prevent his exodus from the country to the city” (Tieken, 2014, pg. 18). In order to create docile black laborers, white leaders often changed the curricula in black schools from a classical liberal arts perspective to the Hampton Model, which focused on farm and trade labor. Samuel Chapman Armstrong first proposed the model and his student, Booker T. Washington was a strong proponent of the Hampton Model. It became a dominant influence throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. The purpose of the model was to ensure a black working class by teaching black students farm and trade labor (Tieken, 2014). The model was often criticized by leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois for its focus on an industrial education, which he argued diminished higher education for African Americans (DuBois, 2003). Other opponents of the model argue the Hampton Model is an example of how the education of blacks often supported the economic and political interests of white leaders especially in the rural South (Tieken, 2014). Whites often relied heavily on the labor of even black children particularly in the agricultural workforce. Therefore, they often limited the availability of both public and private schooling. If schools did exist, students often had the arduous task of walking several miles to school because transportation was not offered for black children unlike white students. The Hampton Model, the repression of education and schooling for blacks, the

requirement to not only fund and build their own schools, contribute money to white schools by paying double taxes and the creation of separate private academies (which often included better facilities, resources, etc.) illustrates the long-standing problems blacks from rural area have faced regarding schooling and access to educational equality.

The Brown Decision and Counter-Resistance

Although the *Brown* decision of 1954 intended to provide access and equal education for African American students by trying to end racially segregated public schools, desegregation did not occur because the court did not outline a strategy for implementing school integration. In addition, various forms of resistance tactics emerged. According to Kenneth Andrews (2002), legal victories such as *Brown* often create opportunities for countermovements, which are different from social movements. Andrews credits Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) with providing the best description of countermovements, which is “a movement that makes contrary claims simultaneously to those of the original movement” (Andrews, 2002, p. 917). In the case of *Brown*, white flight, the creation of Citizens’ Councils and segregationist private academies emerged especially throughout the Deep South as countermovements to resist the Supreme Court’s mandate to desegregate schools (Andrews, 2002).

Citizens’ Councils originated in Mississippi on “Black Monday,” the day of the *Brown* decision by whites who refused to change the educational status quo (McMillen, 1971). The Councils consisted of doctors, lawyers, bankers, political and religious leaders as well as local whites who were “dedicated to the preservation of states’ rights and racial integrity” (McMillen, 1971, p. 11). Besides their widespread growth in Mississippi, Citizens’ Councils gained popularity in other southern states such as Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama. They were concentrated in rural areas with a high African American population. The Councils often used

fear and other tactics to prevent supporters of desegregation from securing employment, credit, mortgages, insurance policies and other purchases from local stores within their communities. Like the Ku Klux Klan, some Council members resorted to violence against advocates of desegregation. In addition, the Councils sought to minimize or eliminate African American voting rights in both state and local elections.

The Segregationist Private Academy Movement

Besides the growth of Citizens' Councils, the segregationist private academy movement gained widespread notoriety especially in the South as a way to resist desegregation mandates by the federal government. Hershkoff and Cohen (1992) describe the movement as "the South's massive resistance" to integrate schools. As a result, private segregation academies enrollment in the South increased from 25,000 to 535,000 during the years of 1966 and 1972 (Herkoff and Cohen, 1992). In Alabama, private segregation academy enrollment more than doubled between a short span of only three years (1968-1971).

The establishment of segregationist private academies was a countermovement to the *Brown* decision and operated under the guise of "school choice" for parents seeking an alternative to public schooling; which dominated the South prior to desegregation mandates. To prevent desegregation, many Southern states diverted their support from the local public schools to the new private segregationist academies by funding tuition at the academies, providing buildings and other educational supplies. For example, the Choctaw County Board of Education helped create the private segregationist academy South Choctaw Academy by providing the school building, books, athletics uniforms, band instruments and other items that once belonged to the local public schools (Hershkoff and Cohen, 1992).

Many years after *Brown*, schools failed to desegregate until the passage of key laws and court decisions throughout the country. In 1963, Fred D. Gray filed *Lee v. Macon County* in order to force the integration of a small group of African American students into Tuskegee Public High School, which was still segregated even nine years after *Brown v. Board of Education* (Parker, 2017). Although litigation for *Lee v. Macon County* lasted from 1963-1970, passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) Act all proved instrumental in trying to desegregate schools. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 threaten to withhold federal funds from schools who were in compliance with the desegregation mandate and did not reach an agreement with HEW (Parker, 2017; Buck, 2009). HEW and *Lee v. Macon* played a significant role in desegregating schools in Alabama because Judge Frank Johnson outlined a plan for the immediate integration of public schools by detailing how schools should oversee school consolidation, teacher recruitment, certification, training, placement, training, transportation, etc. (Parker, 2017). Although the order did increase the enrollment of black students at former all white schools, it did allow freedom of choice programs, which maintained the existence of private segregationist academies. Proponents of freedom of choice plans argued it satisfied the requirement of the *Brown* decision because students allegedly could attend any school. These plans were later considered as an ineffective method for integrating schools. For example, the HEW reported a very small percentage of African American students enrolled in white schools. Currently, several of the private academies still exist and are not integrated. The following table includes enrollment by race of some of the private academies in the Black Belt Region of Alabama for the 2015-2016 academic year and illustrates how the schools remain segregated even at this present time.

Table 3: Private Academies in Black Belt: Enrollment by Race/ Ethnicity

*Source: National Center for Education Statistics
Private School Universe Survey Data for 2015-2016 School Year*

School	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Other
South Choctaw Academy Est. 1969	0	0	0	237	0
Patrician Academy Est. 1970	0	0	2	280	1
Southern Academy Est. 1965	0	0	0	237	0
Marengo Academy Est. 1969	0	0	0	201	0
Sumter Academy Est. 1970	1	0	0	159	0
Wilcox Academy Est. 1970	1	0	1	235	0

Many scholars argue the growth of the private academies in the South created several longstanding problems that currently plague students attending public schools within the same areas. First, many of the public schools lost a substantial amount of funding. In their study of the segregation academy movement in Choctaw County Alabama, Hershkoff and Cohen noted public schools in this county experienced financial cuts in the following ways: decreased state aid, local tax support as well as support from community members since key stakeholders within the community stopped supporting the local schools, instead they shifted their money to fund private schools (Hershkoff and Cohen, 1992, p. 11). Additionally, the creation of the private academies created even more racial separation within the communities based on both race and class. Lastly, the establishment of the private academies created a negative stigma towards the

public schools and feelings of “less than or inferiority (Hershkoff & Cohen, 1992, p. 14). Hershkoff and Cohen (1992) stated, “the dual school system created a stigmatizing effect on black children because it consigns them to an inferior educational system that lacks the support of the larger community, which has a profound effect on the hearts and minds of the students attending the public schools” (Hershoff and Cohen, 1992, pg. 15). Nonetheless, these issues still impact rural public schools in the South to this day.

So far in my literature review, I have provided an overview of critical race theory and how it can be used in order to analyze educational inequalities faced by rural African American students. Additionally, I have provided a historical synopsis of the education access problem African Americans have faced dating back to slavery. In this section, I will provide an overview of rural schools, rural schools in Alabama, and discuss African American rural students and Higher Education.

Overview of Rural Schools

According to Paul Theobald, the American schooling experience throughout the nineteenth century and even the early decades of the twentieth century can be described as rural. Mara Tieken (2014) describes the United States of America as solely a rural nation composed of rural communities and schools. During this period, rural schools were very vital to society because “rural schools were primarily a preparation for life in the community, giving students the skills, values and knowledge needed for a life lived there (Tieken, 2014, p.12). Additionally, rural schools were the apex of the community. According to a rural resident, rural schoolhouses served as “the center-educational, social, dynamic, political, and religious of a pioneer community” (Tieken, 2014, p. 13). The schoolhouses were so important to rural communities to not only educate students, but to also served as gathering places for community fellowship, as well as civic and religious events.

However, the rise of industrialization during the nineteenth century caused rural areas and schools to suffer tremendously and to later turn into “Forgotten Places” (Lyson & Falk, 1993). The invention of steam power, electricity, various forms of machinery and large factories caused massive migrations of rural workers to bigger northern cities. The new focus on industrialization replaced rural communities and agriculture as the center of the country’s economy. These changes caused many rural residents to leave the very rural communities that once served as the foundation of this country. The new developments not only impacted the country’s politics in regard to rural communities, but also rural schools. For example, the migration of workers in turn caused the development of more crowded urban schools and forced many rural schools to consolidate or to close.

Ironically, rural schools which once served as the focal point of society slowly began to be targeted as problematic and inadequate spaces as a result of industrialization. Many politicians, education reformers and researchers often depicted rural education and schools as failures. The first documented report describing the so-called failures of rural education was published in 1896 by an elite group of educators, the Committee of Twelve, which was formed by the National Education Association (Tieken, 2014). According to the report, rural schools suffered from “inefficiency, a lack of standards, an absence of state oversight, a want of official and intelligent supervision, and an abundance of untrained, immature teachers” (Tieken, 2014 pg. 16). Additionally, they blamed the community as “the underlying problem of rural schools (Tieken, pg. 16, 2014). Other reports such as Ellwood Cubberley’s *Rural Life and Education: A study of the Rural-School Problem* stated:

The rural school has been left far behind, educationally, by the progress which the schools of the neighboring towns and cities have made. Managed as it has been by rural people, themselves largely by lacking in educational insight, penurious, and with no

comprehensive grasp of their own problems, the rural school, except in a few places, has practically stood still” (Tieken, 2014, p. 16).

However, many scholars argue that the reason rural schools have so-called “stood still” is due largely because researchers, historians and school reformers no longer consider them important due to various reforms, industrialization, modernization, standardization and consolidation (Tieken, 2014; Allen-Smith et al., 2000). Paul Theobald (1991) argues that historians mostly analyze urban schools when researching educational developments in this country. Therefore, “traditional American educational history has been marked by a very undue clarity of focus (Theobald, 1991, p. 3). In fact, the *History of Education Quarterly* revealed 80% of education topics published related solely to urban education (Theobald, 1991). This is a clear indication of the focus on urban schools and neglect of rural schools and students. For example, testimony before the U.S. Congressional Committee revealed only five percent of research dollars go towards rural areas. According to Cichchinelli and Beesley (2017) argue few researchers have analyzed rural education and rural students. In their review of the literature regarding rural education within the past few decades, they noticed most of the literature was sparse and did not address specific rural issues. The most common topics regarding rural education consisted of the following: Programs and strategies for special needs students, instruction, school safety, student life and work planning, factors influencing academic performance, student attitudes and behaviors, leadership, staff recruitment, and retention, teacher preparation and development (Cicchinnelli and Beesley, 2017, p.6).

Nonetheless, policy makers fail to understand the pertinence of rural schools and continue to overlook them when creating educational policies (Tieken, 2014). Strange et al (2010) argue that rural education is perceived as invisible and education policy decisions are based on urban issues (Strange et al, 2010). In *Why Rural Matters 2013-2014: The Condition of*

Rural Education in the 50 States, a biennial report released by the Rural School and Community Trust, revealed nearly ten million students attended schools in rural districts and 50% of all school districts are considered rural. This report is pertinent because it is one of few reports which emphasizes the need for policymakers to address rural education issues with the goal of providing information and analyses that focus and prioritize the needs of rural public schools and their communities and describing the complexities of rural environments. In turn, this will help policymakers better understand the challenges faced by rural students with the hope that they will compose policies to combat those challenges. According to Johnson et al (2010), meeting the needs and addressing the issues related to rural education and schooling warrants the attention of education policy makers especially higher education officials. For example, at one state flagship, total enrollment was over 30,000 students for one academic year. The freshman classed increased to over 7,000 students. However, this number only includes 95 students from the surrounding rural counties who actually enrolled. These numbers illustrate several things: 1) higher education policy makers seem oblivious to the lack of students enrolling from rural areas 2) there should be more attention on the needs of rural students and college access 3) the dire need to address the issues and challenges regarding rural college access and why researchers and higher education officials need to respond and be more cognizant to the needs of students from rural areas.

The Black Belt

The Black Belt, which is a rural area in Alabama, like most rural areas is rich in history and continues to face many challenges such as extreme poverty and issues within both rural schooling and education. This region is often described as “a forgotten place that must be brought back into the national conscience so that particularly disadvantaged status of the region

can be addressed” (Lyson and Falk, 1993, p. 54). The social condition of the people and economic prospects of these rural counties hold important sociological lessons and strong implications for the formation of a rural development policy” (Lyson and Faulk, 1993, p.54). The Black Belt is commonly known as one of the most impoverished geographic regions within the United States and consists of counties within the following states: Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. Currently, the following counties in Alabama make-up the Black Belt: Bullock, Dallas, Hale, Macon, Pickens, Sumter, Choctaw, Greene, Lowndes, Marengo, Perry and Wilcox counties.

The area is also known as “cotton counties or ‘Plantation South’ because the Black Belt was known for its rich dark soil, cotton farming and a large population of slaves. For example, research indicated half of Alabama’s enslaved population resided heavily within the ten Black Belt counties where their labor was often exploited. This caused this region to become one of the richest in the antebellum United States. After the decline of agriculture due to industrialization, this region is now considered one of the poorest areas in the country (Allen-Smith, Wimberley, & Morris, 2000).

Besides defining the Black Belt for the color of its soil or cotton, W.E.B DuBois defined the region in a more expansive and sociological way (Lyson and Falk, 1993 p. 55). DuBois focused on “the historical legacy of slavery and the continued presence of large numbers of blacks whose entire histories were grounded in this truly unique American heritage. Nowhere else in the United States had there been slaves in such absolute numbers as large as the total population. Nowhere else in the United States was there a group of people who were “freed” but remained, quite literally, as peasants- freed from slavery, but indentured to the land by virtue of a system of contracts and economic arrangements supported by political might and physical

violence” (Lyson and Falk, 1993, p. 55). Today, many people describe the once lucrative counties of the Black Belt as a place of terrible oppression and disadvantage especially for African Americans. Data released from the U. S. Census Bureau indicates the counties of the Black Belt are indeed some of the poorest and lag behind in many ways such as employment and education. In 1967, the President’s National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty labeled residents of the Black Belt as “people left behind” (Lyson and Falk, 1993, p. 56). Falk et al states, “No part of the United States has been more forgotten or overlooked than the Black Belt. It is a region like no other—here African Americans first were enslaved, were later freed, and remain in large numbers to this day, here political oppression was a way of life for blacks, a historical fact of life that is slow to change where poverty in early all aspects of life is still normal for many people” (Lyson & Falk, 1993, p. 73).

Rural Schools in the Black Belt

After examining the literature there are few recent scholarly articles that analyze the issues of rural schooling specifically in the Black Belt region. Lindahl’s 2011 article *The State of Education in Alabama’s K-12 Rural Public Schools* provided an overview of K-12 rural public schools in Alabama by comparing rural districts to its city and suburban counterparts. He posits rural schools are vital to the state of Alabama and warrants attention. Like most rural schools, schools in the Black Belt region continue to face challenges such as access to adequate resources, teacher recruitment and retention, test score issues, graduation rates and college readiness. Therefore, the Rural School and Community Trust ranks the state of Alabama as third on the list of highest priority states in education.

One way to address the educational needs and challenges for African American students from rural areas such as the Black Belt in particular is by understanding the rich history of the

area. Many scholars argue understanding the role of geography is very pertinent because this will aid in understanding the historical, social and cultural impact on rural inhabitants; which in turn can explain how space and place has shaped their beliefs, identity and place in society.

According to Kathleen Budge (2006), an understanding of place can best address both the strengths and challenges existing in rural America. She states “rather than viewing rural communities as places where people live, policymakers have viewed rural areas as sectors of a national economy (Budge, 2006, pg. 2). Therefore, when rural sectors such as agriculture can no longer produce valuable goods such as cotton, rural areas are then deemed expendable or viewed as a commodity (Budge, 2006). Unfortunately, this has been the harrowing history of rural America the past decades. According to Lyson and Falk (1993), rural communities have experienced “transitioning economies particularly driven by neoliberal policies that have lifted international barriers to trade and production. Yet often have undermined local economies and created new uncertainties for rural communities” (Lyson and Falk, 1993, pg. 96). The outcome of neoliberal policies and economic restrictions has caused many problems for rural places such as: job loss, manufacturing shut downs due to global outsourcing or offshore production, disappearance of family farms, labor market contraction, prevalence of low paid service sector employment contributing to rising inequality, increased levels of household level poverty and economic insecurity (Schafft, Killeen and Morrissey, 2010, p. 97). Additionally, other adverse effects consist of decrease in housing values and revenues such as property tax, disposable income for rural residents and closure of locally owned businesses (Schafft, Killen and Morrissey, 2010). For example, demographic trends show that during the years between 1997 and 2003 more than 1.5 million rural people employed in industries which were once focal points of rural economies lost their jobs. Consequently, more people moved from rural areas in search

of employment; therefore, causing the only growing population for rural America to consist of newly incarcerated residents residing in rural penitentiary systems (Schafft, Killen and Morrissey, 2010).

Economic transformation has not only impacted rural communities, but also rural education. The above example illustrates the interdependence between people and place. According to Budge (2006), place matters because where children come from and where their schooling occurs influences what they know and can do, thereby influencing their measured achievement in ways that privilege some and marginalize others. Roberts and Green (2013) state that, “space matters in education; however, yet it is often overlooked and regarded as unproblematic in education policy and research. For them, “the rural has been socially constructed as backward, viewed as of the past and valuing old ways, difficult and in need of rescuing” (Roberts and Green, 2013, p. 766). Therefore, the rural is often marginalized and this marginalization has led to the limited ability to critique the influence of globalization and neoliberalism on rural places and education (Roberts and Green, 2013).

According to Roberts and Green (2013), most of the education history of this country “rural and urban schools have been simultaneously compared and considered as if they were essentially the same and it is this dualism of being different yet the same that reveals how space and place are ill-considered and subsequently have created a geographical blindness” (Roberts and Green, 2013, pg. 765). For example, the creation of various educational policies such as the former No Child Left Behind Act, illustrates how policy makers fail to consider the concept of place and the differences between urban and rural schooling. Researchers such as Matthew Bounds (2014) argue education varies by region or place and is not static. Therefore, education should be comprised of different curriculums, learning and teaching that is appropriate to

student's geography, place, culture and identity. In other words, there must be a connection between student lives and place. Although Budge (2006) outlines the following similarities amongst rural places: a) low population density and isolation b) school and community interdependence c) oppression as lived experience d) history of conflict regarding the purpose of schooling e) an outmigration of young talent and salient attachment to place; rural schools and communities differ from each other and face their own set of issues and challenges. Therefore, the educational dualism that has existed throughout American history should not continue to be perpetuated. The concept of place is key to addressing the many challenges of schooling and education, especially in rural areas.

Besides education, the concept of place has garnered more attention across various disciplines such as architecture, ecology, geography, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, literary theory, psychology and cultural studies (Budge, 2006). In the article, *Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education*, David Grunewald expounds on the theory of place and how it can be used as a “multi-disciplinary construct for cultural analysis and to unearth, transplant and cross fertilize perspectives on place that can advance theory, research and practice in education” (Grunewald, 2003, p. 619). Grunewald continues “place teaches us how the world operates and how our lives fit into the spaces we inhabit. Thus, “places make us as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped” (Grunewald, 2003, pg. 619). Although culture and place are deeply intertwined, our relationship with place has been obscured by an educational system that neglects them. Therefore, schooling has often distracted from the very context and impact of place (Grunewald, 2003). Many scholars call for a deeper discussion on the relationship between places (such as schools) and the places where people live their lives

(Gruenewald, 2003, pg. 623). Gruenewald, a proponent of analyzing place especially in education and schooling, states “when we accept the existence of places as unproblematic, we also become complicit in the political processes, however, problematic, that stewarded these places into being and that continue to legitimize them” (Gruenewald, 2003, pg. 627).

With the growing emphasis of place in many disciplines such as education, many researchers such as Budge, Gruenewald and Bounds stress the importance of placed-based education, which is a fairly new concept within the realm of education. Although there are many definitions, most researchers define place-based education as a “community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life” (Bounds, 2013, pg. 78). Proponents such as Barnhardt argue that it can be a powerful construct that can change the landscape of education because it simply allows students to be self-sustaining by offering real world experiences that will help them learn and grow. Place based education simply allows students to move from the macro-level or broader context of education, instead it allows students to appreciate the local level of education. In turn, this will allow students to have a deeper appreciation of place, especially for rural students. It will hopefully remove the inferiority complex that some students experience, or the idea that suburban or urban places are better than rural areas. Research shows educators often prepare students for a standardized education with the hope that they will compete at a global level not a local one. This practice often causes many rural students to leave rural areas because educators reinforce the idea that they cannot be productive or successful by residing in their hometown. Yet, some students may not leave their rural place of residence; therefore, they need to be equipped to survive in the places in which they live, hence, place education can be of relative importance.

African American Rural Students and Higher Education

Research shows that rural students, who often include African Americans in the South, are one of the most underrepresented groups in higher education. Oddly, this group is often ignored and receives little attention in research. Arnold et al (2005) conducted a comprehensive review on research on rural education and discovered very few researchers are studying rural issues. This is often due to the lack of funding for research in rural contexts. They argue that the existing research lacks rigor and quality. In the article, *The Golden Age of College Access*, the authors argue that “few studies have actually focused on the qualitative differences in educational opportunities for rural students and even fewer address the role of higher education” (Schafft and Youngblood, 2010, pg. 193). McDonough states “college access for rural students is an underrepresented area with little attention paid to the ways in which rural culture and higher education intersects and interrelate” (McDonough, 2010, pg. 193). Byun, Meece and Young (2012) are among the few scholars who have provided some insight into rural research by examining the disparities in rural and non-rural educational attainment in higher education. Their study revealed rural students continue to lag behind in college enrollment and degree attainment (Byun, Meece, and Irvin, 2012). Through their study on the career and educational aspirations of rural African American students, Means et al (2016), discovered the following prevalent themes prevalent within the body of scholarship on rural students: educational aspirations of rural students, socioeconomic status (SES), occupational aspirations, college choice and educational resources. Their 2016 study was the most recent study that focused on the African American rural experience and college choice (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016).

Understanding College Access

The historical overview on blacks and access to education supports the critical race tenet regarding the constant prevalence of racism in American society. Despite the decision of *Brown*

v., the Board of Education, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, the Higher Education Act of 1965 and other mandates the issues of equal educational opportunities and access continues to persist to this present day. Within the realm of higher education, African American students at predominately white institutions (PWIs) face negative experiences due to racism, are forced to take racially-biased college entrance exams and as a result face inequitable funding. There were several landmark cases that addressed the issue of access and race in higher education. In *Bakke v. Regents of the University of California*, the Supreme Court ruled against racial quotas but allowed universities to consider race as a factor in their admissions policies in order to diversify their population (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). This ruling and other affirmative action policies were called into question in *Hopwood v. The University of Texas Law School*. In this case, race could not be used as a factor when reviewing minority student's law school applications in Texas. Other cases involving the use of race in college admissions decisions and access to higher education are *Gratz v. Bollinger*, *Grutter v. Bollinger* and even more recently *Fisher v. The University of Texas at Austin*. In June 2016, the high court ruled that race and ethnicity could be considered in the college admissions process at the University of Texas at Austin. Many people would argue that race and ethnicity in the college admissions process opens the door to higher education; however, the door is only slightly opened due to many other structural barriers underrepresented groups face when trying to enter the world of higher education.

Models Used to Understand College Access

The common barriers faced by marginalized students regarding college access are due to financial needs, k-12 mission and advising services, information on postsecondary education and financial aid, admission practices and policies, college preparation in k-12 institutions and family

involvement (Gildersleeve, 2010, p. 12). In order to understand college access and to explicate the underrepresentation of marginalized populations such as rural students, most scholars often utilize the following models: econometric, Hossler's Three Phase Model of College Choice and Bourdieu's Sociological Model of Reproduction.

The three-phase model of College Choice, which was developed by Hossler and Gallagher, and later reinvented by Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), is considered "the preeminent model of the college choice process" (Gildersleeve, 2010, pg. 25). The first phase of the model is the predisposition phase. During this phase, students develop the desire to attend college. The second phase of the model is the search phase in which students begin researching various colleges and universities, plan college visits and prepare to take college entrance exams (e.g. SAT and ACT). The final phase of the model is choice. This phase often consists of a two-step process: 1) students deciding to attend a higher education institution. 2) Students making a selection on which college they will attend in order to further their education. Critics of the three-phase model often view it as a too linear process with students simply progressing from one phase to another and does not take into consideration variations of the process and that students from different backgrounds or socioeconomic status may not experience the same linear process. Instead, some scholars view the model as more appropriate for understanding how white, middle and upper-class students navigate the college choice process. For example, Freeman argues that the three-phase model should consider cultural differences when assessing the predisposition, search and choice practices of African American students. In this study, I will investigate how the college choice process is acutely different for African American students from rural areas.

In order to further understand cultural differences and structural barriers regarding college access and the admissions process, some scholars have used the sociology of Pierre

Bourdieu and his Social Reproduction Theory. His framework is often used to explain how higher education and the college admissions process can reproduce inequalities in various ways based on race and class. For example, Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory when applied to understanding college access often analyzes socioeconomic status, racialization, physical geography coupled with structural barriers such as schooling, standardized testing and how they affect college attendance (Gildersleeve, 2010). Perna offered a different model in order to understand college access because she felt the existing models fell into the following frameworks: economic human capital investment or sociological status attainment. Her conceptual model focused on integrating individual, school, and higher education, social, economic and policy contexts by which college going takes place (Gildersleeve, 2010).

Besides Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction and Hossler's Three Phase Model of College Choice, some researchers have utilized the Econometric Model in order to understand college access and the decision-making process of how students determine to pursue higher education. According to college theorists such as Becker, 1975; Cohn, 1979; Johns, Morphet, and Alexander, 1983; in the econometric model students outweigh the cost to attend college and compare those costs to potential earnings once they graduate from college. Additionally, factors such as socioeconomic income, parent's occupation, their education and income are all factors in the econometric model and can influence student's college access and choice (Freeman, 1997).

College Access and Financial Aid

It is critical to note that besides the constructs of race, class, and place, one of the biggest growing obstacles regarding access to college especially for rural Black Belt students is the ability to pay for higher education and the changing federal financial aid policy. In the past, financial aid once paved the way for many low-income students to attend college through various

federal grants and work study programs. However, in recent years there have been major changes in federal policies that has caused a shift to mostly merit-based aid, which has catered more to middle and upper income families; therefore, making college less affordable and inaccessible for low income students. These changes have negated the goals of the original Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. According to Davis (Davis, Green-Derry, & Jones, 2013), the purpose of this act was to increase equal educational opportunities for underrepresented students through the allocation of financial resources by establishing the following: Educational Opportunity Grants (EOGs), federally guaranteed loans for low and middle income students by private lenders, Federal Perkins loan and various work study programs (Davis, Green-Derry, & Jones, 2013). However, some scholars argue EOGs were poorly implemented and did not provide clear directions to institutions (Davis, Green-Derry, & Jones, 2013). The redesign of the HEA in 1980 led to not only a decrease in student aid, but also a decrease in African American enrollment at some colleges. In their study of African American and Latino enrollment at four-year colleges in five major cities, Orfield and Paul (1988) attributed the following factors for the decrease of African American enrollment at those colleges: increasing racial segregation in schools, rising costs, insufficient assistance for students unprepared academically for college and lack of commitment from higher education institutions to the needs of underrepresented groups. Additionally, research often indicates how the shift from Pell Grants to loans has led to the ineffectiveness of federal aid programs in supporting underrepresented groups. The Pell Grant program was founded to assist low-income families afford college and once covered the majority of college expenses. According to the Institute for College Access and Success, the Pell Grant program only covers less than one-third of the cost of college attendance; which is the lowest coverage in over 40 years. Long and Riley (2007) argue aid programs have decreased access for

low income students and instead have focused more on merit-based aid, education tax breaks for middle and upper-class families, and more focus on affordability issues for wealthier families instead of those who may be economically disadvantaged. This shift has been detrimental to low income families because to begin, these students do not fully understand the complicated financial aid process and forms. Secondly, they are reluctant to take out loans because of the fear of the return on investment or the inability to pay the loans back due to the systemic unfair salary structure of blacks compared to whites. For example, the current full Pell Grant award for the 2018-2019 academic year is \$6,095. To understand the affordability and accessibility barrier for students from low socioeconomic areas, one state flagship's annual tuition cost for in-state students is estimated to be \$10,780 and \$28,100 for out of state students. This amount does not include books, mandatory room and board fees or any other miscellaneous college expenses such as meal plans, parking expenses etc. Therefore, even if a student is afforded a full Pell Grant, they will still have to find a way to pay for their remaining expenses by securing loans to cover any additional costs or by receiving some form of merit aid such as a National Merit Scholarship which covers tuition, room and board, study abroad opportunities, a stipend, and in some cases a computer or some other technology allowance. However, research indicates that recipients of these awards often come from middle or upper-class families (Sacks, 2007). Also, it is important to note that before students even enroll and receive any form of aid, many colleges require students to pay a series of pre-enrollment fees that range from not only the application fee but mandatory housing, orientation and enrollment deposits that can total over \$600. These pre-enrollment fees, lack of financial aid and scholarships are key barriers to college access for students from a low socioeconomic status. According to Bounds et al. (2016), rural students face

additional barriers such as less rigorous courses, lower academic achievement and postsecondary aspirations, family income and education and fewer resources.

Understanding College Access Through Capital and Habitus

In this last section of my review, I provide an overview on the literature regarding the college access problem and the barriers rural students often face as they navigate the web of higher education. In order to understand the college access problem, many researchers such as McDonough, Nunez and Perna have relied on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Over the years, this country has constantly struggled with racial reform. As previously discussed the issue of race has dominated many court decisions, documentaries, protests, television programs and even daily conversations. Race has and will continue to be a prevalent factor in our society. Since place, race and class are important stratifiers of each other, it is important to include the relevant literature regarding class and college access. According to Guinier (2004), race often disguises various complex relationships of power such as class, geography and gender. Social class is often considered “the elephant in the room” and is rarely mentioned because it is covered by the guises of race. Therefore, neglecting to include class in the conversation along with race and place, we are continuing to perpetuate inequities within our society especially within the realm of education. Sadly, these inequalities are often ignored or not discussed; therefore, schools have become “sites of struggle, compromise and serving as a proxy as well for larger battles over what institutions should do, whom they serve and who should make these decisions” (Apple, 2006, pg. 195). Additionally, the failure to consider race and place along with class has led to the dangerously stratification of America’s higher education system by social class (Sacks, 2007). In order to further understand how inequalities are often reproduced and create structural barriers to college access, many scholars have utilized the sociological framework of Pierre Bourdieu.

His method of analysis is very pertinent because it brings to light the subtle ways in which inequalities persist on a daily basis and how they serve as a form of power to dominate individuals based on race, class or gender (McDonough and Nunez, 2007).

Bourdieu's sociological framework often focused on social class and is useful for examining the role of class and educational opportunities for students within the institution of schooling because his theory centers on "the role of schools and schooling in the legitimation of the class structure by transforming social distinctions into educational distinctions, the unmasking of the largely hidden educational process of symbolic domination, the identification of the institutional, societal and cultural forces that structure class reproduction and oppression, the sociology of the academic profession and the clarion call for a reflexive sociology that turns back on itself and examines the doxa of scientific discourse that unwittingly shapes our perceptions" (McDonough and Nunez, 2007, p. 139). Also, Bourdieu's framework is useful for examining the nature and source of persistent inequalities that exists within education, identifying specific moments of domination in the patterns of everyday life and the subtle ways in which codes of distinction serve as a form of power to dominate individuals based on race and class group patterns (McDonough and Nunez, 2007). In Bourdieu's classic work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu describes the following core concepts which often serve as the nexus of his theories: capital, habitus, and misrecognition. The term capital often refers to an "object or an attribute, possession, relationship or quality of a person, which is exchanged for goods, services or esteem" (McDonough and Nunez, 2007, p. 143). Additionally, Bourdieu's theories are based on the economics of exchange in which people are constantly in the pursuit of profits and struggle for social position. Therefore, people are constantly converting the various forms of capital in order to gain or maintain a certain social position in society. For

example, race can be considered as a form of capital that is often converted in many ways within the institution of higher education, the site where academic capital is gained (Harris, 1993).

In order to better understand the college access problem and the barriers certain students face, many scholars have applied a Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory and his critique of education as reproduction through the concepts of habitus, capital and misrecognition.

Capital

Capital is defined as an "accumulated labor and when appropriated on private exclusive basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (Richardson, 1986, p. 15). Throughout time, capital accumulates in its objectified or embodied forms and has the capacity to produce, reduce or expand itself in various forms in order to ensure that everything is possible or not. According to Bourdieu, five forms of capital exist: economic, cultural, academic, social and symbolic." Cultural capital is considered as the attitudes or behaviors that upper-class privileged parents pass on to their children in order to maintain or advance their socioeconomic status (Bourdieu, 1977). Additionally, cultural capital can be characterized into three forms: the embodied state, an objectified state and institutionalized state. The embodied state refers to learning certain skills that are considered valuable in social interaction such as the appreciation of certain forms of art, music, or learning another language. The objectified state refers to physical possessions that signal cultural capital such as owning an expensive piece of artwork. Lastly, the institutionalized state refers to cultural capital that signifies certain intellectual qualities or skills. Some scholars argue cultural capital is the best hidden form of capital and is key in social reproduction strategies because the other forms of capital are more censored and controlled (Richardson, 1986). Regarding the other forms of capital, economic capital refers to the possession of cash, stocks and any other financial

assets. Social capital refers to relationships, networks, or group memberships that are used to help individuals navigate their social position (e.g. such as membership in secret societies of Greek organizations). Academic capital is any academic, vocational knowledge or skills that serve as evidence of current success in education and will later propel the individual to acquire continued educational success that will later be converted into occupational success.

Bourdieu's concept of the various forms of capital is connected to his notion of field. He describes field as areas of conflict that are structured by their own histories, internal logic, patterns of recruitment, reward and external demands (McDonough, 2007). Additionally, "fields are constantly transformed by their participants in a dynamic where aggregates of actors gain capital and then these actors influence and eventually change the structures (McDonough, 2007, p. 150). Gaddis describes capital, habitus and field together as an "extended metaphor for life as a game" (Gaddis, 2012, p. 2). For example, higher education can be considered a field with students acting as actors in which there is a constant struggle or competition where they utilize various forms of capital in order to increase or maintain their social position. Hence, they exercise their capital, so they move on to the next level of the game (Gaddis, 2013). Furthermore, it is usually the white "actors" from a high socioeconomic background who are most successful at playing the game within higher education.

Race, Capital and Higher Education

Race or specifically whiteness can be considered a form of cultural capital that is often converted in many ways within higher education such as privilege over other minority groups and access to better opportunities. According to Cheryl Harris, "whiteness is a treasured property in a society structured on racial caste. The set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset-one that whites sought to

protect and those who passed sought to attain by fraud if necessary” (Harris, p. 277). She explains that whites expect and rely on these benefits and throughout time their expectations have been as she describes “affirmed, legitimated and protected by law” (Harris, year). This is can be described as racial privilege. Leonardo defines racial privilege “as the notion that white subjects accrue advantages by virtue of being constructed as white” (Leonardo, p. 262).

Unfortunately, white racial privilege has spilled over to the field of education. For example, the American education system was founded and operates under policies and curriculums that seem to privilege the dominant group. Although there have been laws and policies aimed at securing an equal and fair education, most policies still cater to the dominant group; therefore, creating vast inequalities within education. According to Sabina Vaught, “black students are educated for the purposes of maintaining exclusively enjoyed racial rights to a system that provides certain whites enormous social and economic privileges” (Vaught, 2011, p. 45). Hence, black students are relegated to a market model education system that caters to the economy of white rights (Vaught, 2011). Unfortunately, black students are exposed to these inequalities early on in their education through course curriculums, testing, tracking etc. Hence this continues on within higher education and supports Bourdieu’s notion of how “key areas such as social space is stratified-some groups will be excluded and others included” (Lareau, 2011, p. 363). Within higher education, many spaces are stratified; therefore, race as a form of capital is often converted in several forms which includes and excludes some groups. Also, race as form of cultural capital is often converted into special knowledge which will help the dominate group navigate through college better and this can lead to better graduation rates. For example, before some students even enter higher education, they are already familiar with “the rules of the game.” In his work, Bourdieu used the analogy of a card game in order to explicate “fields that

provide both the rules of the game and the social space wherein variations of capital exist (Lareau, 2011, p. 363). Students from the dominant group are introduced to cultural capital by their parents exposing them to certain activities which make entering and persisting in college easier. Lareau labels this as the process of concerted cultivation, in which middle or upper-class parents make a conscious effort to expose their children to the arts, athletic activities, develop their educational interests and take an active role in their education. Therefore, these students enter college familiar with the language of higher education, Advanced Placement or IB credit, the communication skills needed to communicate with faculty and staff, knowing what questions to ask and just simply how to navigate the system within higher education.

Other ways in which whiteness is converted into capital is through what Vaught labels as ‘brute educational capitalism: meritocracy’ (Vaught, 2011, p. 43). White students from affluent backgrounds traditionally attend college preparatory schools with Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses with some of the best teachers and resources. On the other hand, students from a low socioeconomic status typically attend some of the poorest funded schools with lackluster teachers, and experience inadequate college preparation because they lack the proper courses and resources; therefore, they will be prevented from doing well on standardized exams such as the ACT or SAT; hence they will not receive competitive test scores for scholarship eligibility as a white student from an affluent background and better school system. Therefore, race as cultural capital converts to access to better scores on college entrance exams. For example, research has shown the prevalence of a test score gap between white and black test takers. In the book *The Black-White Test Score Gap* the authors argue African Americans tend to score lower on vocabulary, reading and mathematics tests than their white counterparts. According to Jencks and Phillips, the average black student scores below 75

percent of white students on standardized tests (Jencks and Phillips, 1998). They state on other exams black students score below more than 85 percent of white students. Nonetheless, once the white students receive the better scores on the college entrance exams, many schools reward them by offering merit-based scholarships based off their test scores. The merit-based scholarships offered to these students are simply reinforcing their social power. Additionally, recipients are being rewarded for their class and capital. These students have the social, cultural capital and knowledgeable parents to understand the importance of maintaining good grades, information regarding college preparatory exams and the economic means to pay for advanced tutoring in order to prepare and ensure better scores on these exams. As a result, these students receive merit scholarships or tuition discounts that they ultimately do not need because of their economic status (Sacks, 2007). On the other hand, students without the cultural capital nor economic means to pay for college are overlooked because they do not bring as much prestige to a school as a high achieving student such as perhaps a National Merit Scholar. Furthermore, many scholars argue college entrance exams cater to elite institutions and white students from a high socioeconomic status. Peter Sacks considers this as “targeting the right customers, with the help of the Princeton Review, the College Board, ACT Inc. and the rest generates a pool of potential applicants who live in the most desirable “geomarkets,” who have the right profile of grades and SAT scores and extracurricular interests, and who also have the right parents and the financial means to pay for college” (Sacks, 2007, p. 145).

Once students have the better scores on college entrance exams which will lead to better scholarships, race as cultural capital will simply convert to additional opportunities such as access to elite programs known as Honors Colleges. Typically, entrance into an Honors College is based on a high-test score on college entrance exams and sometimes along with a certain grade

point average. Once students are admitted into the program they will receive perks such as early class registration, smaller classes, luxury apartment style suites, more interaction with professors, and research and study abroad opportunities. On the other hand, students not enrolled in an Honors College will not receive these benefits. Nonetheless, the amenities Honors students receive compared to Non-Honors students provides evidence of how “separate and unequal systems of higher education—one for the rich, the other for the not-rich exist due to the deeply stratified nature of the social and economic structure in the larger society” (Sacks, 2007, p. 121). Since acceptance into the Honors Program is based off test scores and scholastic achievement, research shows white students typically make-up Honors College enrollment (at one school white student enrollment was 91% and 3.3% black students). This illustrates how race is converted within higher education into capital as a way to include and exclude some groups. Also, it supports Bourdieu’s view of how “educational systems in modern societies serve as the most important method for reproducing social inequalities, but that they do so in a complex and indirect way as an autonomous social institution” (McDonough and Nunez, p. 143). Now that I have explained the ways race is converted in higher education through the conceptual lens of capital, I will explicate the ways it is converted through the lens of habitus.

Race, Capital and Habitus

Bourdieu defines habitus as “an objective relationship between two objectivities, enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). Characteristics of habitus includes: being time and context specific, shared by members of the same social class or group, it frames one’s aspirations, predispositions, actions and lastly

produces strategies that cause the achievement of diversified tasks (McDonough and Nunez, p. 148). For example, some researchers argue people understand where they fit into society early and therefore formulate what they can expect to achieve in life as early as childhood (Dumais, 2005). This supports Bourdieu's notion that "social class differences in cultural capital and habitus begin at birth and increase over time and the initial accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital; in this case, the accumulation period covers the whole period of socialization" (Dumais, 2005, p. 84). Therefore, habitus is a pertinent element to the perpetuation of inequality because "individuals internalize their class status and social position into their tastes and worldview which then reinforce that very same social position and unconsciously reproduce one's status" (Lee and Kramer, 2013, p. 18). Habitus and cultural capital are very pertinent to each other. In fact, some researchers posit habitus serves as a mediator in the relationship between cultural capital and academic outcomes (Gaddis, 2012). In higher education, race is converted as capital through the conceptual lens of habitus in many ways. For example, white students from a high socioeconomic status tend to have a positive habitus and outlook regarding college than minorities from a low socioeconomic status; which sometimes may influence academic outcomes and graduation rates. Additionally, students with the proper cultural capital and habitus will have better chances of navigating through college. On the other hand, students without the proper cultural capital and habitus will likely face a host of issues while treading the academic waters in higher education. For example, black students from a low socioeconomic background will not have the cultural capital needed to prepare them for higher education. This supports Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction which explains "the lack of familiarity with the dominant culture (cultural capital) and thus the absence of the proper

disposition that typically comes from such familiarity (habitus) serves as a barrier to upward mobility for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds” (Gaddis, 2012, pg. 2). Therefore, students from a low socioeconomic background will likely be apprehensive or fearful regarding their postsecondary experience which will not only produce a negative habitus but may also convert into lower levels of educational achievement and attainment during college. A negative habitus of these groups can be problematic because students may shift or alter their goals, expectations or identity in order to align with the dominant group of the institution. This supports the notion of habitus as being “a fluid set of dispositions that are constantly changing as individuals go through different experiences and interact within and with new fields” (Lee and Kramer, 2013, p. 20). Habitus for black students from a low socioeconomic status will likely change because they will be forced to code switch, and take on the speech, attitudes and behavior of the institution in order to fit in and feel a sense of belonging. Another way race converts into cultural capital through habitus is that it may cause a sense of entitlement from members of the dominant group. Lareau explains this will play a pertinent role within institutional settings because students from the dominant group will be more comfortable questioning adults and even in some cases addressing them as equals (Lareau, 2011). Like cultural capital, habitus converts into privilege within higher education. Lee and Kramer posit, “Habitus plays an important role in the American tradition of educational privilege because elite education in the United States has historically focused on instilling students with a homogenous habitus along with cultural and social capital” (Lee and Kramer, 2013, p. 21).

Race, Capital and Misrecognition

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu states, “the whole relationship of the petite bourgeoisie to culture can in a sense be deduced from the considerable gap between knowledge and recognition,

the source of the cultural goodwill which takes different forms depending on the degree of familiarity with legitimate culture that is on social origin and the associated mode of cultural acquisition” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 319). Therefore, misrecognition is the fact that we not perceive the social world as complicated space of conflict and competition between groups (the dominant group and minorities). Bourdieu argues “every recognition is a misrecognition” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 298). Additionally, he posits “ a social world is a universe of presuppositions: the games and the stakes it proposes, the hierarchies and the preferences it imposes, in short the ensemble of tacit conditions of membership, what is taken for granted by those, who belong it and which is invested with value in the eyes of those who want to be of it, all of this rests at the bottom upon the immediate agreement between the structures of the social world and the categories of perception, a perception of the social world as natural and taken for granted” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 298). This quote is very pertinent because it is very applicable to race as a form of capital and how it converts to higher education through the conceptual lens of misrecognition. Through this lens, the race of the dominant group is converted once again into privilege within higher education. This is simply because college administrators and policy members seem oblivious of the ways they create and allow inequalities to persist within higher education through various scholarship opportunities based off meritocracy and elite programs such as Honors programs. Misrecognition illustrates Bourdieu’s notion of how “even though educational expansion has allowed many oppressed groups to attend school, in fact, educational institutions have reproduced and heighten social inequalities not attenuated them” (McDonough and Nunez, 2007, p. 142). College administrators in their quest to lead in college rankings by recruiting the top tier students have misrecognized the space of higher education as a site of conflict and competition that in many cases maintains the social order by excluding certain groups or by making it harder

for them to navigate through college. According to Bourdieu, the college administrators “ignore the contribution which the educational system makes to the reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (Richardson, 1986, p. 17).

In conclusion, this section has included a review of the literature regarding the following areas of scholarship: critical race theory and higher education, an overview of rural schooling and African American students and the issues of college choice and access. As mentioned previously, scholars such as McDonough, Nunez, Lareau and Perna have relied on Bourdieu’s framework in order to understand the college access problem primarily through his concept of capital. This study will expand on each of those frameworks in order to understand the educational experiences of rural African American students and how the resources offered shaped their educational experiences and to helped them prepare for higher education.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodology and methods used to conduct my study on how African American students from rural areas experience access to higher education. First, I summarize the purpose of my study and reasons for using a qualitative design. Secondly, I will describe my methodological approach and methods for conducting the study. Next, I will provide an overview of my research setting. Finally, I will describe the methods for data collection, analysis, and issues of reliability, validity, insider and outsider position of the researcher as well as any limitations in relation to my research design.

Purpose of My Study

According to several scholars (Freeman, 2005; Perna & Kurban, 2013; Means et al., 2016), rural African American students are often an underrepresented and overlooked student population within higher education. Few studies examine rural African American student's perceptions of schooling and the barriers they face accessing higher education. Freeman (2005) argues researchers and policymakers often make policies and conduct studies, yet seldom do they include the voices, opinions or perceptions of African American students who are the key stakeholders for critiquing various problems, policies and programs that will affect their lives. For example, Hossler's college choice model, which includes the decision to pursue higher education, searching and selecting a college failed to consider cultural specific factors or differences when describing the college choice process (Freeman, 2005). This example illustrates how researchers and policymakers often make models or decisions without considering the needs or voices of underrepresented groups. Therefore, the purpose of my project is to provide a space for rural African American students to reflect on their educational experiences and their access to

higher education. This special population is the focus of my study because as previously mentioned both rural and African American students are often ignored and receive little attention in research. Instead, most policymakers and scholars often focus on majoritarian groups or urban contexts. Therefore, this study will address the following research questions:

- How do African American students who have attended rural schools reflect on their educational experiences and resources offered to them?
- How did these resources help them prepare and gain access to higher education?

I used a qualitative research design in order to analyze the experiences of the research subjects within a specific context. Interviewing is a common data collection method for qualitative research because they allow the researcher to gain insight from research participants regarding a particular experience by engaging in conversations semi-structured or unstructured interviews. The researcher then transcribes the interviews to look for underlying themes from the data. For my qualitative research study, I utilized the personal narratives of my participants in order to examine and analyze my participant's educational experiences in rural schools by allowing them to express their thoughts of not only the education they received, but their experiences gaining access to higher education by using semi-structured interviews. I framed the interview questions around addressing the research questions and themes of the study, which included first learning about the participant's background information, high school and college experiences. A copy of the interview protocol is listed in the appendix of this dissertation.

Critical Race Theory and Counter-Storytelling Methodology

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define critical race methodology as the following:

A theoretically grounded approach to research that a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. It challenges the separate discourses on race, gender and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color, b) challenges the traditional research paradigms,

texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender and class subordination; d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength and e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies; women's studies, sociology, history, humanities and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, pg. 24).

A critical race methodology approach in education is often used to resist traditional methods of research, paradigms, theories or discourses that often silence marginalized groups. Instead, it relies on their experiential or lived experience by using methods such as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables and narratives (Solórzano and Yosso, pg. 26).

Also, critical race methodology rejects the production of majoritarian stories because they often distort or ignore the experiences of people of color (Solórzano and Yosso, pg. 29). These majoritarian stories are often utilized within the realm of education in order to try and explain educational inequalities. One way to “counter” majoritarian stories is through the use of counter-storytelling, which is an important tenet of CRT. Delgado and Stefancic define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, pg. 144). Solórzano and Yosso describe counter-storytelling as a way of exposing and analyzing normalized dialogues that produce racial stereotypes within society by challenging the privileged and majority discourse. Counter-storytelling simply gives a voice to the voiceless through personal stories, narratives or the personal stories and narratives of other people (Decuir and Dixson, pg. 27). Counter-storytelling was used in my study to analyze African American students from rural areas experiences with schooling and access to higher education. The students described their experiences attending a rural high school and how they accessed higher education. Additionally, these student's counter-stories provided an alternative perspective by

allowing them to challenge the majoritarian stories often depicted in research regarding students of color, rural schools and their access to higher education.

Sample

For my project, I selected students who attended school in rural Alabama, specifically one of the counties in the Black Belt region. I selected this region based on my prior experience recruiting students from this area because it is often referred to as one of the most forgotten spaces known for its' systemic poverty and racism. I identified students for my study by working with the college recruiter at a PWI and mainly the coordinator of a rural scholars program at a university. This highly selective program is an educational pipeline that aims to recruit rural students to medical school with the hope that they will return to their rural towns as primary care physicians and health practitioners. The pipeline is a sequence of programs which includes: outreach to elementary and middle school students, a residential summer program on a college campus for 11th graders and recent high school graduates and a five-year medical education program for undergraduates. For my study, four of the participants participated in this five-week program which included taking two college courses (English and Chemistry), attending lectures, touring medical facilities and shadowing African American doctors. My pool of participants was relatively small due to few students volunteering to participate in the study and trying to coordinate with the student's schedules. Therefore, only six of the students eagerly volunteered to participate in the study. Two of the students were male and the other four students were female. All of the participants graduated from a rural high school except one. Lisa attended rural schools up until high school when her parents forced her to attend a private high school in another city, which was 45 minutes away because they believed the rural school within their district was inadequate. I wanted to included Lisa's story because of her unique perspective of once attending a rural school and having relatives attend the high school in her district, but she

also has the added experiences of attending a private high school and could shed light on the different types of resources she received by comparing her experience at the two schools. All students are currently seeking a college degree, four at a major research institution and two at a mid -size in-state universities.

To begin my data collection process, I contacted the coordinator of the rural scholars program in order to pass my contact information and a description of my study to any interested participants. A copy of the email is in the appendix of this dissertation. She later emailed me the names and contact information of several students who expressed an interest in my study. I emailed each of the participants a description of the study and invited them to participate. At first, eight students expressed an interest in participating in the study. However, several of the students stopped responding to my emails when I tried to schedule the interviews. Therefore, only four students from the rural scholars program participated in individual interviews. Next, I emailed a former student information regarding the study and he eagerly agreed to participate as well as one of his friends. Therefore, I had a total of six participants for my study. After following up with all of the participants, we arranged a place and time to meet to discuss the study in more detail, answer any of their questions and sign informed consent forms. I conducted all of the interviews in a quiet office on campus because that was the most convenient for the research participants. During our meeting, I assured the students that their participation would remain confidential and that I would use pseudonyms and change some of the details regarding their statements in order to preserve their anonymity. The next section provides a description of the participants and their hometowns.

Participant and Hometown Profiles

Alexander

Alexander is an upbeat, motivated and hard-working student from the rural town of Clover County, which is one of the rural Black Belt counties. He is a senior with a double major in history and communication studies from Clover County, Alabama. He was raised by the collaborative efforts of his mom, dad, and stepfather. Alexander has a younger brother, Alan, who currently resides in Clover County. Both of his parents including his stepfather all dropped out of high school. Both his mom and dad later received their GEDs and his mom eventually completed a few semesters of college. His grandfather, a veteran, received both a bachelor's and master's degree. Alexander describes his brother Alan as very smart, but just doesn't apply himself. Alan attended a historically black college and university (HCBU), but later dropped out. His mom is employed at what Alexander calls a financial insurance type company, while his dad drives trucks and his stepdad is a barber.

Alexander, who described his hometown as depressing, was always motivated to attend college because he did not want to follow in his parent's footsteps of not attending college. During high school, his motivation caused him to seek various college preparedness programs such as dual enrollment opportunities and internship opportunities with various lawyers and judges in his community since his goal is to become a lawyer.

Ironically, his town once served as one of the most significant places in American history; however, it is now referred to as "Alabama's Third World" according to the *Birmingham News*. The town was once a major slave trading center, served as a pivotal setting during the Civil Rights movement and even at one time provided millions of dollars to the local economy (The Nation news article). Driving through the small town today, one will notice two very

different communities. One side, which some people refer to as “the black side,” consists of old dilapidated homes and buildings.

While the west side of town consists of mainly white people and the town’s “whites only” country. According to the Census Bureau, 41.9% of people in Clover County are in poverty. Alexander, who was fascinated by the history of his town, commented that he was keenly aware of both the systemic racial and class issues that exists in his town. He even commented that he just wished the town and the schools weren’t so segregated. For example, the schools are very still segregated because the affluent white students attend private schools, yet the African American students attend what some people label as the “bad” city or county schools. In order to understand the challenging dynamics of his rural community, the tables below illustrate some quick facts regarding Clover from the 2010 Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 4: Clover County Quick Facts

High School Graduation, Percent of persons 25 years+	77.8%
Bachelor’s Degree or higher	16.7%
Persons in Poverty	41.9%
Per capita income	\$16,028

Table 5: Clover County High School Quick Facts 2015-2016 School Year

National Center for Education Statistics

Total Students	889
Free lunch Eligible	580
Enrollment by Race	Black= 880 White= 3 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander= 2 Hispanic= 1

Christina

Christina is from one of the traditional Black Belt counties that was once a popular site for prostitution, gambling halls and even organized crime. During the 1950s, the National Guard had to intervene because of the high crime rate. Presently, violence and crime continue to rock the small rural community. As far as employment, many people from Blanket County work at the local plants, factories, restaurants or drive over to surrounding counties to work.

Christina, who is a junior majoring in Psychology and Criminal Behavior, is fascinated with studying the brain and criminal behavior. She is the oldest of three siblings and will be the first person in her family to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Her mother is a master cosmetologist; her father joined the military immediately following high school and lastly her stepfather, a truck driver, never attended college. The tables below list quick facts regarding Blanket Count from the 2010 Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 6: Blanket County Quick Facts

High School Graduation, Percent of persons 25 years +	84.8%
Bachelor’s Degree or higher	20.7%
Persons in Poverty	21%
Per capita Income	\$20,725

Table 7: Blanket County High Quick Facts 2015-2016 School Year

National Center Education Statistics

Total Students	1310
Free Lunch Eligible	782
Enrollment by Race	Black= 879 White=347 Native American/Pacific Islander= 1 Hispanic=39 American Indian= 3 Other=39

Anthony

Anthony is a sophomore with an interest in news media. He hopes to enter the news market and bring awareness to various topics pertaining to the African American community. Both of his parents graduated from high school, but never attended college. His dad is a truck driver and his mom works as a cook in the cafeteria at his high school. Anthony has two older brothers who both graduated from college and currently work as correctional officers. Besides being very active in several organizations at his school, Anthony completed several Advanced Placement courses while in high school.

His town is notorious for many things such as agriculture with cotton serving as one of its most lucrative crops, medical experiments, the Civil Rights movement, voting rights and even served as a training site for African American serviceman. Like Clover County, Anthony’s town is still racially divided. He described his small town as “pitiful and with no progression.”

Everyone seems to have a “small-town mindset with no push for progression. Everything seemed to be based on tradition and football. Therefore, he recalled growing up in the town as challenging and that he always knew he wanted to “get out.” After graduating from college, he does not plan on moving back to Hill County. He even hopes to make enough money one day to build a house for his mother away from Hill County. The tables below list quick facts regarding Hill County from the 2010 Census Bureau and from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 8: Hill County, Alabama Quick Facts

High School Graduation, Percent of persons 25 years+	81.4%
Bachelor’s Degree or higher	19.3%
Persons in Poverty	32.2%
Per Capita Income	\$17,374

*Table 9: Hill County High School Quick Facts 2015-2016 School Year
National Center for Education Statistics*

Total Students	562
Free Lunch Eligible	269
Enrollment by Race	Black= 154 White= 391 Hispanic= 9 Asian=5 Other=3

Tina

Tina is a shy freshman who plans to major in medical industrial distribution. Both of her parents graduated from high school and her mother recently completed her bachelor’s degree from an online university. She currently works at the local elementary school as a secretary. Her dad, who is deceased, worked at a plant in the town. Tina is the youngest of three siblings. She is very close with one of her brothers, who is a college graduate and helped her navigate the college enrollment process.

Tina’s hometown is really small with only two stop lights. She joked that there isn’t even a Wal-Mart in her town, only a dollar store, gas station and several ramshackle buildings. While in high school, Tina played volleyball, track and basketball as well as tutored athletes during the summer. Although her school did not offer any dual enrollment nor Advanced Placement courses, Tina called herself a nerd who enjoyed going to school and getting good grades. The following table illustrates some quick facts regarding Pine County from the 2010 Census Bureau.

Table 10: Pine County Quick Facts

High School Graduation, Percent of persons 25 years+	84.6%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	15.3%
Persons in Poverty	23.3%
Per Capita Income	\$21,471

Table 11: Pine County High School Quick Facts 2015-2016 School Year

National Center for Education Statistics

Total Students	155
Free Lunch Eligible	96
Enrollment by Race	Black= 151 White= 1 Hispanic=2 Other= 1

Jennifer

Jennifer is a freshman majoring in biomedical sciences with plans to attend pharmacy school. Both of her parents completed high school. Her mother has an Associate degree from the local community college and her father has a bachelor's degree. She has an older sister who started taking college courses at the community college, but later dropped out. Also, she has a younger sister in elementary school. She said her town is very small with only two grocery stores and not much traffic. She enjoyed growing up in her hometown because she relished the land, riding four wheelers and farming.

Jennifer was active in several service organizations in high school and was a member of the high school band where she played the clarinet and was the drum major. Additionally, she participated in her school's dual enrollment program. Her high school was predominately white, and Jennifer believes her school had more resources compared to other rural schools in the area.

Jennifer started working at the local McDonald’s at the age of 16. Her mother did not drive, and her father wasn’t active in her life. Therefore, she was always motivated to attend good grades so that she could attend someday attend college. The tables below list quick facts regarding Bend County from the 2010 Census Bureau and from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 12: Bend County Quick Facts

High School Graduation, Percent of persons 25 years+	80.5%
Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	12.9%
Persons in Poverty	22.2%
Per Capita Income	\$20,064

Table 13: : Bend County High School Quick Facts 2015-2016 School Year

National Center for Education Statistics

Total Students	368
Free Lunch Eligible	174
Enrollment by Race	Black=255 White= 108 Hispanic=3 American Indian= 2

Lisa

Lisa is a senior majoring in Biomedical Sciences with plans to work in healthcare. Both of her parents graduated from high school. Her father has a bachelor’s degree and runs the family ranch. Her mother has a master’s degree and is a physician’s assistant. She has two younger siblings who attends middle and high school. Lisa described her hometown as in the middle of nowhere and stagnant. The town has only a few stores besides Piggly Wiggly and Dollar General. Everyone seems to know everyone in her town. Lisa did not enjoy growing up her

hometown and called herself more of a “city girl.” Lisa did attend a rural middle school in her town but did not graduate from the predominately black rural high school in her town. Instead, she drove 45 minutes to another town to attend a majority white private high school. Lisa says her parents forced her to attend the private school because they knew it offered more resources and it was a better fit for her. However, she said her high school years were an unenjoyable time and wishes she could block those years from her memory. The tables below list quick facts regarding Ship County from the 2010 Census Bureau and education statistics regarding Ship County High School taken from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 14: Ship County Alabama Quick Facts

High School Graduation, Percent of persons 25 years+	75.9%
Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	10.9%
Persons in Poverty	37.7%
Per Capita Income	\$13,611

Table 15: Ship County High School Quick Facts 2015-2016 School Year

*Ship County High School Quick Facts 2015-2016 School Year
National Center for Education Statistics*

Total Students	359
Free Lunch Eligible	283
Enrollment by Race	Black=354 White= 0 Hispanic= 1 Asian= 2

This table provides education statistics regarding the students attending Lisa’s private school Arch Academy.

Table 16: Arch Academy Quick Facts 2015-2016

National Center for Education Statistics

Total Students	229
Free Lunch Eligible	N/A
Enrollment by Race	Black= 29 White=163 Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander= 1 Asian=10 Other=1

The following table provides an overall summary of the participants involved in this study.

Table 17: The Participants

Participants	Major/Minor	Classification	Highest Educational level of Parents
Alexander	Major: History Minor: Communication Studies	Senior	Mother: Some College Father: GED
Christina	Major: Psychology Minor: Criminal Justice	Junior	Mother: Some College Father: High School
Anthony	Major: News Media	Sophomore	Mother: High School
Tina	Major: Medical Industrial Distribution	Freshman	Mother: Bachelor’s Father: High School
Jennifer	Major: Biomedical Sciences	Freshman	Mother: Associates Degree Father: Bachelor’s Degree
Lisa	Major: Biomedical Sciences	Senior	Mother: Master’s Degree Father: Bachelor’s Degree

Data Collection

The data for my study was collected through individual in-depth interviews. I selected interviews as my data collection method because they simply allowed the participants to describe their lived experiences or as Kvale and Brinkman describes interviews as an “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience,

to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009, pg. 1). The interviews allowed my participants to share their experiences and life stories regarding attending and graduating from a rural high school and their views regarding access to higher education. The interviews were conducted face to face in a semi-structured format and lasted for an hour. The semi-structured format allowed me to do additional probing as needed during interview. Additionally, interview questions consisted of open-ended questions in order to allow the participants to freely express their thoughts and feelings. An interview guide, which was approved by IRB, was created in order to provide structure and a systemic approach. The purpose of the single interviews with the participants is for them to share their own personal narratives regarding their schooling and access to higher education. In developing the interview guide, I organized the questions around the goal of the project: to document the educational experiences of rural African American students and what factors may have impacted their access to higher education. Therefore, the questions were framed around first learning about the research participants’ background which included questions regarding their demographic information, high school information and the college enrollment process. The last set of questions centered on the research participants’ transition from high school to college. A copy of the interview guide is located in the appendix of this dissertation. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Modes of Analysis

In order to analyze my data, I transcribed all of the information that was audio recorded during my interviews. Once I transcribed the data, I employed thematic analysis and coding as a way to further analyze my data. According to Hennink (2014), thematic analysis is a very useful approach for analyzing data because it allows for an in-depth approach of examining and

understanding the research issues from the participants perspectives by highlighting their own words (Hennink, 2014, pg. 90). Using my participants own words from the transcribed interviews, I reviewed and compared the data from each of my interviews in order to locate common themes. By compiling narratives from my field notes and interviews from the participants, my study includes rich, detailed and focused data despite having a small sample of participants. This type of data is pertinent to the study because it “reveals the participants’ views, feelings, intentions and actions as well as the contexts and structures of the student’s lives” (Charmaz, 2010, pg. 14). Throughout my analysis, I reviewed and compared my data in order to find similarities and differences within the same interviews and to compare statements from other interviews (Charmaz, 2010). I later utilized NVivo 11 software to assist with creating themes, organizing and creating meaningful categories of my data. Once I mapped out the major categories that were congruent with the focus of the study, I created sub-themes and categories framed around answering the research questions.

Validity

Some scholars question the authenticity and validity of research since most paradigms are outcomes of traditional Western views. Therefore, they cause researchers to perform research that conforms to the status quo of the dominant culture. Additionally, Denzin and Lincoln assert the issue of validity, reliability and objectivity is more problematic with critical theory, feminist theory, and other epistemologies of color (Denzin and Lincoln). Koro-Ljungberg views the term validity as “inaccurate yet necessary” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010, p. 603). He asserts “validity has turned into a signifier for good and valuable qualitative research, and audits (e.g. member checking, audit trail, and interrater reliability) can be used mechanically to guarantee and

produce truthful representation or reality and “real” objects of research” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010, p. 603).

Although researchers view validity as very pertinent, many argue it is socially constructed and some scholars view it as a problem not solution. Koro- Ljungberg states “the existing literature has documented that validity can be defined in numerous ways and can function differently based on epistemological and theoretical variations” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010, p. 603). For me, conducting a research project with valid results means getting accurate information from my interviewee without trying to influence his responses and remembering to remain objective as the researcher. Therefore, I tried to create appropriate questions and develop a sense of trust with the participants early on during the interview process by assuring the participants that they could talk freely, and all of their responses would remain anonymous.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Consideration

Conducting any form of research either quantitative or qualitative brings up the issue of ethics. As researchers, we have an ethical responsibility to produce factual information and not misconstrue or present misleading data. I tried to create trustworthiness with the participants early on by explaining the purpose of the project and reviewing the interview procedures. Additionally, I assured the participants I would maintain their confidentiality by allowing them to choose a pseudonym. Also, a pseudonym was used for both the names of the participants’ high school and town.

Summary

This chapter described the qualitative methods and methodology used to conduct my study on how African American students from rural areas experience schooling and access to higher education. I provided my rationale for conducting a qualitative study, provided an overview of Critical Race Theory and Counter-storytelling as methodology, background on my

setting, sample and ways I collected and analyze my data. In chapter four, I will provide the findings for my study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American students from rural areas reflect on their educational experiences and how the academic resources available helped them gain access to higher education in terms of academic preparation, motivation to pursue higher education, enrollment and transition to college. As mentioned previously, few researchers are studying the issues related to rural students and education. Few studies examine the experiences of rural students, teachers and schools (Kryst, Kotok, & Hagedorn, 20018). Therefore, my goal for this project was to concentrate on this sample of students by allowing them to share their experiences of living in a rural town, describe their schooling, the academic resources they received and ways they accessed higher education.

The research participants in this study were asked to describe both their experiences of attending rural schools and their reflections of the educational resources they received and how they thought these resources prepared them for college during semi-structured interviews. The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions framed around the research participants' demographic information, high school and college experience. A copy of the interview protocol is located in the Appendix of this dissertation. After transcribing the interviews, I analyzed and coded the interviews. This chapter includes the findings from each of the interviews. First, I include a brief description of the participants and their rural hometown. Based on my analysis, I have organized this chapter into three major sections: 1) Stories of Home 2) Stories of Schooling 3) Stories of College. I present the themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' stories, which will answer the guiding research questions:

1. How do African American students who have attended rural schools reflect on their educational experiences and the resources offered to them?

2. How did these resources help them prepare and gain access to higher education?

The final section provides a conclusion of the results included within this chapter and highlights the common experiences of the research participants.

Stories of Home

For me growing up as a black kid there, I would say hopeless.

[Christina, Blanket County, Alabama]

In a study by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2002) entitled *Perceptions of Rural America*, most of the respondents viewed rural communities as the nation's backbone and as a beautiful serene place with lots of animals, livestock, and a terrain of beautifully landscaped trees and farms. Additionally, most people tend to perceive rural communities as more relaxed and secluded from the hustle and bustle of city life. Rural communities are often viewed as safe places to raise a family. However, most of the participants for my study painted an immensely different image of their rural communities when asked to describe their experiences of growing up in rural towns within rural Alabama. They often used adjectives such as depressing, hopeless, violent, scarce, lackluster, pitiful or challenging when describing their rural communities. I share their stories of growing up in a rural community in order to understand the challenges these students faced not only culturally, but also to expose how certain rural environments can impact students academically. According to Johnson et al (2010), understanding the complexities of rural environments will allow education policy makers such as higher education administrators to better understand and address some of the challenges rural African American students face especially when they matriculate at their colleges and universities.

Sites of Struggle

As mentioned previously, some rural areas have changed significantly since the industrialization, modernization and consolidation of agriculture (Petrin, Schaff, Meece, 2014;

Tieken, 2014). According to Tieken (2014), black farmers in the south were acutely impacted the most by these changes which caused the closure of farms, high unemployment, poverty, and population loss due to residents migrating from rural areas to find work or to explore other opportunities. Thus, some rural areas are often described as sites of struggle, which was the first theme to emerge in the participants Stories of Home. For example, Alexander described his town of Clover County as not only dangerous, but as one of the worst ones to live in the entire state because Clover County has both a high crime rate and double-digit unemployment.

Clover is just simply depressing. No jobs. Nothing else to do. A lot of violence. We need more jobs, but no one wants to come to Clover because of the poverty. Most people don't know that Clover is the most dangerous cities in Alabama as of right now and the worst to live in apparently, but Clover isn't easy. Clover is depressing. Honestly, it is. No jobs. Nothing else to do. A lot of violence. We need more jobs, but no one wants to come to Clover because of the poverty and most businesses that come are bankrupt. Our mall is almost empty right now because businesses are moving out. Clover is just... "not on the move" for a lack of words sorry.

[Alexander, Clover County]

Alexander was keenly aware of both the systemic racial and class issues that exists in his town and often grapples with the fact that his town was once so productive in agriculture and was even a popular training site for military pilots but is currently labeled a "Third World" county within the state of Alabama because of the poverty and crime statistics.

I looked at some numbers and I realized only 15% of the residents in Clover County have degrees and to me that just is ridiculous and 60% of children are in poverty. That's just unacceptable and the obvious root is our education system and that's kind of guiding where I want to go now because I am realizing how everything is tied together. It's all just making sense. We just need more people to step up and who want to make a difference. But, I know it's not going to change overnight. Yeah, so I've seen a lot poverty, violence and gang violence.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

Similarly, crime and violence are rampant in Christina's hometown of Blanket County.

Crime is high, but like it's not like a bad city. It's like here (referring to her current college town), but it's the best way to describe it except people die a lot.

[Christina, Blanket County]

She even describes her town as “hopeless” and “cursed.”

A lot of people say it’s like a curse. If you leave and come back, you are stuck. Like if you leave you gotta stay gone. Literally, everybody that has left and came back, they stuck. Like they, haven’t been able to leave. Every time someone asks why don’t you ever come back? I don’t lie. It’s because I don’t want to die. Literally, somebody has died from our class every year since like 8th grade and I’m a junior in college now, so (laughs) that’s a long time for people to be just be dying and people from classes above me classes below me, they are dying too. I mean people...just young people. I’m like it’s not my time! I don’t want no car accidents! I don’t want to get shot! I don’t want nothing! People walking out their front doors and they are getting shot. I don’t want that, so I gotta go!! And then, I’m like I’m not going to make any money here.

[Christina, Blanket County, Alabama]

Like Alexander, the other research participants described their towns as small with limited business and employment opportunities. For example, Tina said,

As far as the town goes, I mean I don’t know. It’s just really small and it’s lots of old buildings just sitting there and sometimes people will try to open up shops and things but they don’t last very long so they end up closing them down really soon. I mean I think most of the employment goes to the schools because I know that’s where my mom works and of course we have like a grocery store and we have a Church’s Chicken and a dollar store, so I mean there aren’t many employment opportunities, so I guess you can say people just try to find a job where they can. I think most of the time they try to go to somewhere like to another town which is maybe 15 miles away from us and get a job. It’s like bigger than ours or either they go out town and come up here or work at somewhere like a plant.

[Tina, Pine County]

Tina, who, did not notice the condition of both her town nor school until high school, used the word “lacking” to describe them both.

I really didn’t notice the condition of my town and our school until maybe my junior or senior year of high school. We are just lacking in a lot of things. As far as the town goes, it’s just really small and it’s lots of old buildings just sitting there and sometimes people will try to open up shops and things, but they don’t last very long so they end up closing them down really soon.

[Tina, Pine County]

According to Lisa, growing up in Ship County meant living in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do. She described Ship County as stagnant with limited opportunities.

My town is country, umm...like scarce because there aren't a lot of stores besides the basics Piggly Wiggly, Dollar General. I would say everybody knows each other for the most part. Ship County is I would say stagnant, not very much growth.

[Lisa, Ship County]

Getting Out

Due to the poverty, unemployment, violence and lack of opportunities described above, most of the participants stressed the desire of leaving their towns or "Getting Out" once they graduated from high school. The conditions of their hometowns motivated each of the participants to pursue higher education in order to escape the crime, limited opportunities and to simply get away and experience more diversity. Therefore, the second theme of "Getting Out" or their desire to leave their rural towns emerged in the participants' Stories of Home. Alexander explained, "many people in my hometown would like to "get out;" however, they just need to know that it is possible. I knew early on that my only way "out" was to obtain a college degree." Lisa, who calls herself a city girl, always knew she wanted to leave her town.

I didn't particularly enjoy growing up there and I just want to experience more than what my town offered. It just wasn't for me. The people in Ship County are like let's just go work at the car manufacturing plant, but I want to experience more in my life and I can't do that in Ship County.

[Lisa, Ship County]

Therefore, Lisa and most of the other participants do not plan on returning to their hometowns once they complete college. Christina was very adamant on not returning to her town.

I feel like everybody should leave because there aren't a lot of resources to help people get out. Yeah, it's just not a lot of help. I don't think I could ever move back! I wouldn't be successful if I move back there. Personally, there is nothing there for me. I'm never moving back there! No, never!

[Christina, Blanket County]

Jennifer is the only research participant who expressed the need of "getting out," but only to attend college since she aspires to be a pharmacist. She described positive images of living in Bend County. Growing up in her rural town, meant spending time with her cousins, riding four

wheelers, picking berries and spending lots of time on the farm growing crops such as watermelons, tomatoes and peas. She described not knowing about the amount of poverty that existed in her town until she started volunteering with the Outreach Ministry. She explained this ministry basically served as a food bank in her community and before they gave the recipients the food, they had to sign forms detailing their income and explaining why they needed the food. Jennifer said, “we had like a huge over pour (of people) even though we had a lot of food, we kind of ran out sooner than later.” The experience of working with the Outreach Ministry and realizing the amount of people in her town who needed assistance stunned her.

It kind of shocked me because usually in bigger cities you see where people are like on the side of the street and stuff like that. In Bend County, you don’t see many people walking with bags, dirty clothes and stuff like that, but you can definitely see that the economy is getting to them.

[Jennifer, Bend County, Alabama]

Overall, Jennifer enjoyed living in Bend County and even plans to move back once she graduates from pharmacy school and give back to her community, unlike the other research participants.

The Black Side of Town

It’s just really sad because of how small our town is to have that separation. It’s sad that in 2017 and we still have this going on.

[Tina, Pine County]

The statement above describes how Tina feels regarding the segregation that exists within her town. The last common theme explicated in the Stories of Home was the separation that existed within the small towns, which they often referred to as the black side versus the white side of town. Most of the participants described the separation that existed in their towns and how growing up on their side was different from their white counterparts, who attended different schools.

If you don’t know, Clover County is pretty segregated. Most of the affluent white children go to private schools and the black kids and those in the city or just in the area

they go to the city schools which are predominantly black. We have a county school and that's where umm I guess people who live more in deep the outskirts of Clover County.

[Alexander, Clover County]

Tina had a similar experience in Pine County. The black students lived on one side of town and attended the all black school and the white students stayed on their side of town and attended their private academy. Pine County was so separated that she rarely interacted with white students except for occasional service projects and sporting events.

It's like the only time we would interact with them is through the 4H club (a service organization) other than that I would see some of them at our football games, but it's not like anybody would try to go to their football games or participate in any of their activities, so it was really separated. I really thought that because of the way our town is and how we have two different schools; my school is mostly African Americans I thought that was kind of how things were gonna be everywhere, but it's not so that was another thing. It's just really sad because of how small our town is to have that separation..

[Tina, Pine County]

Similarly, Christina described the racial separation that existed in Blanket County.

Growing up as a black kid in Blanket County, for me I would say hopeless. Growing up as black kid there. Generally. People get shot every day. It's just a lot of robbing, killing, fights and stuff like that in the black part of town. But growing up as a white kid there is a completely different thing.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

Each of the participants explained how they wished both their towns and schools weren't so separated. The segregation of their towns provided another reason for the students to leave their towns. Tina said, "I just wish it wasn't like that. I wish our school was bigger too so there will be more diversity and that's another reason why I just want to go to college for diversity. It's just that it's not really much opportunity."

Friday Night Lights

Despite the towns being racially segregated, sports were often the common factor that brought all members of the community together regardless of their race or socioeconomic status.

Hence, the next theme that emerged in the participants' Stories of Home was the importance of sports, specifically football. Most of the research participants described their towns as being centered on football. Tina, who played three sports in high school, volleyball, track, and basketball, explained the main thing people in her small town seem to enjoy are sports, mainly football.

Our town and school system is really centered on football. The stands during the football games are packed with many supporters. They even have a booster club centered around the football team. We (referring to the other sports besides football) would sometimes get some funds, but most of the times we had to come up with them ourselves by doing fundraisers and I realized they really don't support the rest of the sports.

[Tina, Pine County]

Similarly, Christina's town and school enjoyed football and often showed their support with pep rallies and parades to celebrate football championships.

Blanket County High is a big sports school, mainly football like it's up there with some of the big schools. When it comes to football, we have all the sports money in the world. They just built a really nice athletic facility, but when it comes to academics we need more money.

[Christina, Blanket County]

According to Anthony, everything in his town was based on football and that it wasn't uncommon for his school to pass failing athletes on as long as they were the star players. He describes "a lot of issues of you are only wanted when you can be used" when referring to some of the black athletes at his school. As long as the black athletes played well, members of the white community supported them, and they were often the face of the school. However, Anthony detailed how his community quickly disowned one of the black football players, but shifted their support for him once he started playing well and represented the high school at a popular statewide football event. At Pine County, Tina explained the athletes seem to only care about football..

I had tutored the football players during the summer and I just realized they don't really push them to do anything. They just really care about the sports and that's the sad thing. My coach was little harder on us. She was just really serious and knew when grades came out. If we happened to get a bad grade, we would be punished by conditioning or running laps, so she was really serious about it.

[Tina, Pine County]

In this section, I have shared the key findings that were central to the participants Stories of Home. Their descriptions of home provide greater insight into the complexities and challenges they face living in rural and often segregated communities. Their stories highlight the endemic permanence of both race and place within their rural environments.

In the next section, the research participants reveal how their rural environments impacted them academically by sharing their Stories of Schooling.

Stories of Schooling

“Education is really the most important thing. Like, we have a lot violence in Clover County especially now there's been a spike in gang violence, but it all stems from our poor education system.”

[Alexander, Clover County High School]

In the Stories of Schooling, I share the findings from the participants high school experiences. Each of the participants attended rural schools. However, Lisa's parents did not allow her to attend the rural high school in her community of Ship County. According to Lisa, she was “forced” to attend a private Catholic high school 45 minutes away in order to have access to better resources and opportunities. Interestingly, her high school experience differed in some ways from the other participants and I present their experiences under the following themes that emerged from their stories: Environments of Lack, Still Separate and Unequal, Teaching for the Big Test and Curricular Experiences.

Environments of Lack

“It's just that it's not really much opportunity. They don't really present to you because it's mostly African American students.”

[Tina, Pine County High]

Alexander is a graduate from Clover County High, which is known as one of the most historic high schools in the south. Prior to enrolling at Clover County High School, he attended a predominately white private middle school that he described as “drastically different’ from other schools. His mom forced him to attend the private middle school because she believed he would get a better education than attending the city schools. Additionally, she thought Alexander would have access to better resources by attending the private middle school, but as he explains that was not the case.

My mom actually did not want me to go to school in the city because she knows how bad Clover County Schools are and well just that they don’t really cater to students as much and she felt that I would be better off at a private school. But once I got there in middle school, I had a couple of racial incidents, but nothing too major that made me want to run away or anything. The people there were nice, but I noticed there that the education there was just as bad as other schools. I figured I would be getting a better education because I mean because that’s just a stereotype that they have more resources, but the middle school actually didn’t because it was a private school and all the funding actually came from us.

[Alexander, Clover County High School]

Alexander was allowed to attend Clover County High if he agreed to participate in the school’s early college program, which was their dual enrollment program that allowed the students to receive both high school and college credit for free because the school initially received funding from the city or state to support the program. Unfortunately, funding was eliminated shortly after Alexander enrolled at Clover County High and he had to cover the cost of participating in the program which he said was from \$330-\$500. He later discovered that funding for the program was moved to the other county school because perhaps “I guess they deserved it more than us” but no reason was given as to why the funding for the dual enrollment program at Clover County High was removed. Besides the dual enrollment program, Clover County High only offered a couple Advanced Placement courses.

When Alexander first started attending Clover County High, he described the building as very old and just simply looked bad. However, the school later received a new state of the art building with bright colors, a new gymnasium, more classroom space and even iPads for the students. Alexander was even a tour guide for the new building. Yet, despite having a new building and technology, the school sometimes did not have enough books for the students.

Furthermore, Alexander described the private high school as having better teachers who really cared. For him, “those kids had great teachers that honestly cared, and I could see that. The students at the academy were better prepared because the school hosted all kinds of science and technology fairs.” On the other hand, having a good teacher at Clover County High depended on the subject.

I remember a lot times for two or three of my classes, we had a substitute for either a whole semester or whole year and that kind of took away from the educational experience because it was just somebody up there babysitting us, just giving us worksheets and things, so we had good teachers that cared mainly in my senior. I feel like that’s when we had the best teachers. A lot of the career tech teachers were very hands on with students and they wanted the students to succeed, you know those who might not be academically inclined. They tried to push them to make sure they got their credentials and they did the necessary things to succeed in their trade. But, that’s pretty much all I have to say about the teachers.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

Christina had mixed feelings regarding her school. She described the physical building of the school as old and needing some renovations. The bathroom stalls didn’t close. The sinks in the restroom were old and one cannot see through the mirrors in the restroom. Regarding other resources, she often had outdated books while attending Blanket County High.

Anthony graduated from a small predominately white rural school. His mom wanted him to attend Hill County High because she worked at the school and she thought Anthony would have access to better resources. However, he described his school as “old and a potential fire hazard.” Although there have been plans to renovate the school, nothing has happened as of yet.

He recalled not having access to certain textbooks such as math. The students were not allowed to take the books home, but sometimes the teacher would email the students pages from the books; however, they would not have access to previous chapters if they needed to review former topics.

Tina graduated from a very small rural high school with only around 44 students in her graduating class. She often used the word “lacking” to describe her school and the educational resources that were available to her.

Our building is old so in the winter time, it’s just terrible because we are always cold!” Like the building, the labs were old, the microscopes were out of date, and the floors had broken tiles. I mean they tried to fix it, but it wasn’t up to date at all. We didn’t have like up to date microscopes or anything like that. We had old lab aprons. Yeah, it was really old.

[Tina, Pine County High]

She believed the appearance of the school affected the student’s academic performance.

I feel as if the school looks better then students would uphold it to a higher standard and would actually try to take care of it which would then reflect in their grades because their environment would be looking nice, so they would try to do better in school. I wish we had more funds because there are a lot of renovations that need to be made. Some of our textbooks would be just falling apart because they were so old.

[Tina, Pine County High]

Due to funding issues, her school did not offer any dual enrollment programs, Advanced Placement nor IB courses. Thinking back on her high school experience, Tina wished the teachers did more for the students at her school.

I don’t mean to talk down on the teachers but they don’t teach at the student’s individual level like if there is a student who is struggling more than the others, they’ll be like you have to get at this level or you will get left behind and I understand that, but it’s many students that are slower to get the concepts than others so it’s the individual help that they may need and that’s why a lot of the students they either drop out or have to stay behind a grade. I realized later on that she (her English Teacher) really didn’t actually take the time to help the students who were actually struggling because she would always say you know you need to get this or you would just be left behind. When I took her class, I was like ok maybe she was trying to get them to step-up but it was later

that I thought about it and I was like that it's kind of bad for the students who couldn't grasp the concepts so easily because if they were to go to a university like here; of course you are not going to always have the individual help, but I feel like if you were to have it in high school it would develop your skills better.

[Tina, Pine County High]

Unlike the other participants, Jennifer believed her high school offered more resources compared to other rural areas such as dual enrollment, Advanced Placement courses, and even more volunteer opportunities. However, Jennifer says her school building could have used a little work. According to Jennifer, "the school was definitely old. The bathroom...most of them did not have doors on them, no tissue. It was horrible! You could look up at the ceiling and it was like brown! It was pretty bad!" She says the school just had lots of old things including textbooks. Jennifer recalls having an "excellent" science teacher who she believes spent her own money in order to make sure her classmates had the things they needed for their science classes. According to Jennifer, "it's definitely time for another school. They just got a new elementary school, so it's definitely time for a new high school. There's just a lot of old things." Similarly, Christina recalls having old textbooks at her high school and needing more money for academics instead of the new athletic facility the school recently built.

Although Lisa lives in Ship County, she did not attend the local high school in her town. Her parents forced her to attend a private school, Arch Academy, which was several miles away in a different town. Lisa says her parents forced her to attend the private school because they believed she would have access to better resources and because the public local school, Ship County High, was "very unsafe." Lisa said, "I feel like you don't learn anything there. I don't feel like I would have made it at Ship County High. It is very unsafe. People fight all the time. People get maced!" Although Lisa had access to better resources than some of the other research participants such as updated books and labs, she recalls being very miserable at Arch Academy

and going through a transitional period from attending an all-black middle school to attending a predominantly white school with only 10 minority students in her class.

I was miserable because it's such a different environment and the rules. I just I feel like I was in a prison every day! It was just really bad! Like it was bad. My senior year was ok, but 9th through 11th was awful! Just because like when you have been in that kind of environment for so long like the other black kids they become immune to what is happening because they are used to it so like my first year there coming from an all-black school I wasn't ready.

[Lisa, Arch Academy]

One of her teachers accused her of stealing a clipboard. Despite the challenges of attending Arch Academy in the beginning years, Lisa is grateful for the education and the opportunities she experienced there. The curriculum at Arch Academy was considered very rigorous and Lisa said she often had a very "heavy workload." Looking back, she says she now appreciates the challenging curriculum that she received at Arch Academy. Unlike the curriculums at the other research participants' schools, Arch Academy focused more on college preparatory courses. The school offered more Advanced Placement courses and other college preparatory courses. Additionally, the building was a little more up to date than some of the other schools described by the research participants. Looking back at her overall experience, Lisa said, "I definitely feel like my education was definitely better there as opposed to being at Ship County High."

Still Separate and Unequal

A consistent theme in the participants' Stories of Schooling was the existence of segregated schools. Each of the participants discussed how the black students in their communities often attended the public schools, which they believed offered them access to unequal resources. On the other hand, the white students attended private academies. Tina explained that even though her community was very small, there was still a private academy for white students and the African American students attended Tina's school, Pine County High. She described the town and the schools as really separated and wished she could change that.

It's sad to say that it's actually this far ahead in 2017 and that's still going on. I still can't wrap my mind around why the private schools are still there. It's always been like that and our junior high used to actually be a high school so that used to be just the school that the African American students went to and it's always been the academies that the Caucasian students went to.

[Tina, Pine County High]

The only time she recalls interacting with white students from the academies was through community service organizations or at sporting events since sports were a major component of the Pine County Community. Tina states, "I would see some of them come to our football games but it's not like anybody would try to go their football games or go participate in any of their activities, so it was kind of like really separated." Alexander described how most of the affluent white children attended private schools and the black kids and those in the city or just in the area they went to the city schools which are predominantly black. Regarding the racial make-up of his school, "I remember seeing two white people in my school. Two white people give or take a few. We had some foreign exchange students, but our population was extremely low. We may have had a handful of foreign exchange students in my four years." According to Alexander, the private high school academies in his community were often better schools.

Stone Academy is the best private school in Clover County and they hosted all kinds of science and technology fairs. Those kids had great teachers that honestly cared, and I could see that. The students at Stone Academy were better prepared. I don't know about their numbers or anything...but I know...

[Alexander, Clover County High]

Christina thought she attended a "good" school. However, she recalls realizing her school wasn't that good when comparing it to students who attended the private academies or other schools within the state.

Talking to white kids their schools are great...I'm like dang I did go to a suck school, and then talking to black kids I went to a great school compared to the others in the state such as Clover County High. They were like we barely got books and all that! And I'm like oh wow!! I'm like what? Our school wasn't that great, but then looking at other Alabama schools or other people talking about Alabama high schools come here and talk about high schools I'm kind of like I did go to a good school.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

Christina did have a small population of white students who attended her high school. However, she recalls how the black student athletes often bonded with the white students only through sports. Christina explained,

We had a small little handful of white kids with a whole lot of money that nobody liked. Then we had the white kids that liked played sports and they were still super cool and everybody loved them and then the black kids that played sports and if you were like our superstar you would kind of fit in with the white kids that played sports but if you didn't play a sport, you were forced to be good.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

Despite attending the public rural school in her community with more white students, Jennifer still noticed some of the issues regarding access to certain resources and opportunities. Jennifer states, "I feel like the white students just have the access and get the resources they need." This was due to both race and class issues that existed within her town. Like Jennifer, Anthony and Lisa attended predominately white schools. They both recognized the separation that existed at their schools. The statement below depicts how Anthony described the importance of knowing your place as a black student at his high school.

At the same time being in a predominately white school system, who still has racism around you had to know your place as far as being a black student, you had to know your place about how you could move...like you could only move certain ways as far as how you went about doing certain stuff, how you went about talking to teachers and this and that.

[Anthony, Hill County High]

The participants' stories on the existence of all white academies support the literature on how segregationist academies continue to operate to this day despite federal mandates to end segregated schools years ago. More information regarding the academies can be found in the Appendix of this dissertation.

Career Tech and Teaching for the Big Test

The final themes in the participants' Stories of Schooling consist of their curricular experiences. Most of the research participants described their high school curriculums as having more of an emphasis on Career and Technical courses and only teaching to pass the high school graduation exam, which was sometimes referred to as the "Big Test."

Our main focus at Clover County High happens to be more Career Tech, Welding, Brick Masonry, Drafting, Construction framing, CNA such as that. They do a good job trying to prepare people to get a trade, but they don't really cater to those who want a higher education. My school felt like we just gotta get a trade. Which I understand the importance, but it kind of negatively affected those who are looking to go to college and what not. I realize the need to focus on career tech and focus on trades, but there are some really smart kids that come through Clover County High and I feel like that group of students should receive more resources than they have now because we are kind of held back...

[Alexander, Clover County High]

According to Tina, "my counselor would either try to make you look into a technical job, go into a trade school or try to get into the program at the local car plant or go a two-year school." Her school did not offer any college preparatory nor Advanced Placement courses. Christina's school had an array of career technical courses ranging from HVAC air conditioning classes, automotive, cosmetology and healthcare. Similarly, both Anthony and Jennifer's high schools focused more on Career Tech or the military. For example, Anthony described how military recruiters frequently visited his school so much they sometimes hid from the recruiters. Also, Anthony believed most people in community stressed Career Tech or joining the military because they knew careers in those fields were "guaranteed checks:" unlike his chosen field of news media.

Besides stressing Career Technical courses at Clover County High, Alexander felt the teachers only cared about making sure students passed the high school graduation exam.

It's like you come in here you're going to study for this big test that's at the end and everything else in between the extra we don't really care about. They really didn't care if we were learning. They didn't really care for our personal growth. I just wish our school wasn't so segregated... wish it wasn't geared towards taking a test, The Alabama High School Graduation exam.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

Christina described how the students at her school were often bribed to do well on standardized tests such as the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE). The AHSGE was replaced with the ACT her junior year and her principal offered to give the students something if they did well on the exam.

My principal was like y'all are the first class that's gotta take this your junior year. He was like if y'all do good, I got something for you, so we did great and I forgot what he gave us, but he gave us something. But they did bribe us if they wanted us to do something, they would give us something in return. We used to have these party things in the gym, they played music, had cotton candy machines, mascots, played games and like food and sodas, candy and stuff.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

On the other hand, the curriculum at Lisa's high school had more of a college preparatory emphasis with more rigorous and heavy course load. She did not mention any Career Tech courses during her interview.

In the next section, the participants shared their stories of college by describing the ways they accessed and prepare for high education.

Stories of College

Despite the research participants rural background and the resources available to them, they each had a common goal: to pursue a college degree. For many of the participants such as Lisa and Christina, not going to college wasn't an option in their household. For the others such as Alexander, Jennifer and Tina, obtaining a college degree was a way to break the cycle of poverty and escape some of the violence that happened in their rural communities.

From a very young age, my family always told me I was destined for greatness and I understand that they always stressed to me that they did not want me to repeat the

cycle. You know they didn't want me to follow in their footsteps as I mentioned my mother and my father both dropped out of high school, so they stressed to me the importance of a proper education and I've seen firsthand the struggles you have to endure without an education already. I mean my mother is one of the most intelligent people I've ever met in my life and she is a very nice person, but she has been held back so many times because she didn't have that piece of paper or that degree to get that job for some of the places that she has applied. They often told her she was over-qualified, but she was under-qualified because she didn't have that degree, so seeing my mother struggle firsthand it definitely encouraged me to get an education and to see my grandfather who has an education, you know he has a master's degree and is pretty successful in life however you want to measure that, but just growing up in my family they just really stressed the importance of a proper education, so it really wasn't a choice for me. I knew that I had to come here.

[Alexander, Clover County High School]

Jennifer always knew she wanted to go to college in order to obtain a better life.

Well, my family didn't have the best of many things and I have definitely seen the struggling side of life and I just knew from then I didn't want to be there anymore. So, going to college for me means success, overcoming something and not letting where you come from dictate where you are going.

[Jennifer, Bend County High]

Although Tina knew she wanted to attend college since elementary school, she had a few other reasons for pursuing higher education.

I realized it's kind of necessary for me to go because knowing my mom of course she got her college degree later, but she had to work when she was 16. She was working since then all the way until now and I don't want to do that. I kind of want to make her proud and of course my brother has already graduated, and I want to do it too. It was just something I wanted for myself like I want a better life so then when I get older maybe I'll be able to help out my mom or brother if they need it.

[Tina, Pine County High]

In *Stories of College*, I share the major themes that evolved from the participants' experiences with accessing higher education. The following themes emerged from their narratives: *Lagging Behind*: the participants felt they were behind due to the limited access to guidance counselors, resources and the type of course work that was available to them; which in turn caused the participants to believe their high school did not prepare them for college, *Winging It and Overlooked*: describes their feelings of going through most of the college application process on their own and being overlooked by certain recruiters, colleges and

universities. The final theme of feeling lost includes the participants' narratives of their struggles with transitioning to college.

Lagging Behind

Since Alexander knew early on that he wanted to attend college, he began researching dual enrollment and early college programs at the beginning of his freshman year of high school. He started taking dual enrollment classes starting his sophomore year not only to get a head start on gaining college credit, but also because he did not believe his high school accommodated students who wanted to pursue higher education. For him, dual enrollment catered to people who wanted a higher education since his high school concentrated more on teaching students a trade. Although he did have counselors who were very helpful, Alexander and his classmates who participated in the dual enrollment program argued it was the single most useful resource that truly prepared them for college.

We would have been so behind when we got here! So Behind! Like honestly, I have talked to all of my friends who did dual enrollment and they said the same thing! But, even then when we got here, we weren't really prepared for it because the community college wasn't the same as the university.

[Alexander, Blanker County High]

Besides dual enrollment, Alexander recalls getting some assistance from his guidance counselor regarding the college process. He said, "I did not want to bother her too much because she was responsible for over 200 other students who were unsure if they would even graduate."

Reflecting back on his high experience, Alexander stated, "my high school did not prepare me well for college at all! They just did not prepare me. If I had not done dual enrollment I would have been lost."

Tina had a similar experience at her high school.

I guess you can say with our town there's not much of encouragement for younger students. I mean most of the time they just say ok when you graduate, you are supposed to go to college. I don't think they do much as far as the steps to get you there or

preparing you. As far as the curriculum, it wasn't rigorous like how the college curriculum is. For example, we didn't really do science we just did vocabulary. As far as preparing us, like I said before it will be like certain classes would prepare you and other classes you wouldn't really have to put any effort into it so like right now it's kind of like I'm paying for it.

[Tina, Pine County High]

On the other hand, Christina feels some of the teachers at Blanket County High prepared her for college, but that was the dependent on the subject.

They prepared you depending on who your teacher was because all of the teachers at Blanket County High weren't good teachers. They just weren't good teachers. In English, I felt like I was pretty prepared. I needed help, but it wasn't anything that was like ridiculous.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

Jennifer thought her school offered more resources compared to other rural schools. Students at her school were encouraged to take Honors, Advanced Placement or dual enrollment courses.

When asked if her high school prepared her for college, Jennifer said, "with science and math, they definitely prepared us, but any other stuff not really." Anthony thought his school indirectly prepared him for some of the situations he has experienced so far in college since he graduated from a predominately white school in a small town. Academically, he feels only the school's English department prepared him for college.

On a personal level, I feel like they indirectly prepared me a lot as far as how to deal with people, how to manage myself in certain situations and things like that. On an academic level, I feel that like they stressed that college would be the end of my life and that I would hate it so much, so I should be so thankful that I had teachers like them because when you get to college everyone is going to hate you, your professors won't like you and this and that. Granted, I really haven't had any crazy professors at this moment in time yet, but I feel like no matter what you go through in life I feel like you will interact with crazy people at some point, so they really stressed that college will be the be all end. If you had a smooth transition to college, you did it on your own. It wasn't like they adequately helped you get to that. Now, my English department I can say they did a great job like they taught you behind the scenes things. As far as other things, there wasn't much preparation.

[Anthony, Hill County High]

Even though he was in the dual enrollment program in high school, Alexander did not realize how unprepared he was for college until within the first few weeks of his freshman year.

When I got here I realized how underprepared I was so umm it forced me to go out and find those resources and to network and to try and make-up for what I didn't received in high school and that's why I am so grateful for the First Scholars program cause they were the people in my corner to tell me this is how you do this or should do this and they were just there to answer any questions I had and to really prepare me succeed in college.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

On the other hand, Lisa was the only participant who believed her high school, the private Arch Academy prepared her for college.

Absolutely! If I had to do it again, I would go back, but I'm glad I don't have to do it again! They teach you! The work load is so heavy, you learn how to I guess to deal with it so that when you go to college you're not like oh my gosh I've never done work before, so I feel like that was really beneficial. College is hard, but mostly college is just in my opinion it's just learning how to study what you are given and since I learned that at Arch Academy, I did fine.

[Lisa, Arch Academy]

Lisa believed her high school not only did a great job of preparing her for college not only because of the rigorous coursework, but also because she had a great guidance counselor. She described her counselor as "the bomb!" For the other participants, they believed they had good counselors who did the best they could when they were available. Alexander, who tried not to bother his counselor too much, believed his senior counselor was very helpful. He said, she answered all of my questions. "I bothered her every single day because I needed somebody to go to because other people weren't really helping. She helped very much." Like Alexander, Christina had an active counselor who was very helpful and met with her seniors each month.

We had counselors for each grade. Like in 12th grade she spent the whole year getting us ready for college. We did our FAFSA, we applied, to colleges and completed scholarship applications. Like she met with us once a month I think. She had like a checklist for all of us and we just did like college stuff.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

For Tina and Jennifer, they felt that had good guidance counselors until their senior year when both of their counselors became ill.

She was definitely helpful over the four years, but our senior year she started getting sick, so she wasn't there a lot which was bad for us because we were trying to get stuff in for college. So, for three years she was helpful, but that fourth year she got sick and we didn't have anybody else. We had two other counselors, but they had freshmen and sophomores and they had to focus on their freshmen and sophomore students. She did help us, but she didn't have time to help us how we really needed it.

[Jennifer, Bend County High]

Additionally, Tina feels she may have missed out on certain opportunities because she did not always have a guidance counselor who was readily available to her during her senior year.

Our counselor he did his best to try and help us, but unfortunately in our senior year around the end of the first semester he started getting really sick, so he had to go to the hospital to get an amputation and he was just in and out a lot and there would be long periods of time when we didn't have a counselor so there will be times we would be missing out on things like scholarships. Once he did come back, he would be there sometimes, but other days he would have to be at dialysis or something and then like maybe the last couple of months of the second semester he passed away, so we didn't have a counselor. We had someone who tried to fill in like the librarian, but it's just that if you don't have the counselor there, there are many things that you are missing out on.

[Tina, Pine County High]

At Hill County High, Anthony recalls having only two counselors at his high school. One counselor was assigned 9th and 10th graders and the other counselor was responsible for 11th and 12th graders. Although he said the counselors offered adequate help to students, assistance was offered more to students who the counselors knew around the school.

The way my counselors were set up it was more on a who they knew type of basis, so if they didn't really know you it would come off as if they weren't really trying to help you versus if they actually knew you around the school. So, I would personally go to them for help. They would help me because I was involved in so much. They knew me.

[Anthony, Hill County High]

He described his senior counselor as sometimes difficult to work with because she would often disappear from school; therefore, it was hard for the students to find her when they needed things such as their transcripts or sending other documents to colleges. He recalled one instance during an awards ceremony when he wondered if the counselor really tried to help all students.

When it was time for the awards ceremony, there weren't any black students as far as my senior class on stage. It was about 10 students who got scholarships and a lot of people were mad because the students on the stage received scholarships that totaled over \$50,000 and so it was a lot of angry people in the crowd because we were wondering about all of these scholarships they had and we didn't hear about them. It became a question who was helping who? Why didn't we (the black students) get the same opportunities?

[Anthony, Hill County High]

Additionally, he said there were times he felt like his counselor withheld information regarding certain things such as application fee waivers from the students.

They had application fee waivers but that was another issue. I called that backdoor issues as far as things you had to find out on your own and then you had to ask about it in order for it to be told and when you asked about it was really you are telling them that you knew about it. My counselor had a huge book full of waivers and you had to ask her about it or inquire about it in order for her to tell you about it. So, it was a lot of behind the scenes stuff that you really wouldn't know unless you really inquired about it or if you were friends with the right people who told you about it, so it was a lot of things of that nature.

[Anthony, Hill County High]

Winging It and Being Overlooked

In order to attend college, all of the participants were aware that they had to take some form of college testing such as the ACT or SAT. They all mentioned their counselors mentioned the test at some point. Ironically, many of the participants did not study or prepare for the ACT when they initially took the test. They each recalled "winging" the test the first few times.

Alexander could not recall if his school offered ACT prep courses. He remembered not preparing for the test.

I just went in and took it, got my score back, took it again and then started getting accepted to colleges. The ACT was something we talked about in class. My senior year they tried to implement an ACT prep course, but it was like once a week for 50 minutes. It was a pilot schedule, so it took a minute for things to kind of jell, but they tried. Now, I am informed that they actually have ACT prep classes and they fund practice ACTs. That was something that was much needed and I'm glad that they are doing that now. So, the ACT, that wasn't anything foreign. We were familiar that we had to take the ACT if we wanted to go to college.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

For Christina, her counselors started preparing the students at her high school for the ACT starting her sophomore year. This was partly because the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) replaced the required Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) with the ACT in 2014. Christina did not take an additional ACT preparation courses nor tutoring. She did take the test three times before graduating from high school. Also, Anthony's high school replaced the AHSGE with the ACT. He recalled a big push regarding the test more so during his senior year of high school. Anthony started taking the test his junior year on his own outside of his school and purposely did not prepare for it.

The first time I took it was in February and I actually didn't study. I purposely walked into it blind just to kind of get a feel for it. Shockingly, it was my highest score. I can't remember what it was, but I know it was above a 22. I thought it was so funny because it was my highest score. In April, I took it with the school and then I took it again right after that and so I thought it was interesting that when I studied for it, my score went down and just walking into it blind I got a higher score. I think that when I studied for it, I was more stressed for it as far as just walking into blind. I was just whatever happens just happens.

[Anthony, Hill County High]

His school did offer ACT tutoring; however, Anthony said that was only during the middle of his senior year and at that point he was already accepted into several colleges. Therefore, he did not enroll in the tutoring sessions offered by his high school. Also, the tutoring sessions were \$300, and he recalled that being a big issue and a reason as to why several other students did not sign-up to take the tutoring classes.

It was like a big issue with money. They would try to pressure us to sign-up if we wanted to get higher scores, but we were like ok we just can't pull money out just like that. So, it's like a lot of things even with testing for the AP test, there would always be issues as far as they would tell us things at the last minute that involved us having to paying for and they expected us to have it like that and when we didn't have it, it became an issue of ok well you aren't trying. Clearly you don't want to do this, so why are you even here? It was a lot of things going on like that with people and power was an issue too. As far as testing and stuff, they would tell us that they needed the money on this day because if you don't have the money you can't take it or if you don't have the money clearly you don't want to be here so why are you even taking AP? Of course, me being

the person I am, I read everything, I did research. I'm going to dig deep so I went above them and was like ok we don't have the money right now since you just told us about this on yesterday, so what can we do? It turned out the money wasn't due for a couple of weeks from now, so I think it was an issue of why were they pushing so hard and making it an issue on things of that nature?

[Anthony, Hill County High]

Tina did prepare for the ACT before taking the test. She credits her older brother for pushing her to study for the test, so she could get a higher score. He gave her an ACT prep book and often reminded her to use the book. In addition to working through the problems in her practice book, the librarian at her high school offered an ACT preparation class. She eventually took the test three times while in high school and did not take an additional tutoring or preparation courses outside of school and her practice book.

On the other hand, Jennifer said her high school encouraged the students at her high school to start taking the ACT in the 9th grade if they wanted to get a good score. As a result, she took the test a total of six to seven times. She described herself as "bad at taking standardized tests" and enrolled in the free ACT preparation course offered by the community college in her area. Students could take the course for free, but they had to sign a consent form stating they were low-income. There was an instructor who also offered personal tutoring, but charged \$150 for an hour and a half. However, Jennifer could not afford to take the personal tutoring, so she only used the practice book to prepare the test. After taking it several times and not getting her desired score, she had unfavorable views regarding the ACT.

I don't believe the test is fair. I feel that people who get high scores, it's kind of given to them because they pay over \$400 for ACT prep courses versus people like me who try to get it (scores) the right way by working hard and studying. The ACT really dictates your scholarships and stuff and they really focus on people with high scores because they know for sure those are the ones they know who will excel in college not the medium ones that are going to work hard to try to survive in college.

[Jennifer, Bend County High]

Lisa was exposed to the ACT as early as the seventh grade. She took the test nine times between the 9th and 12th grades. According to Lisa, she “winged” the test the first time. Eventually, her parents bought her an online ACT preparation course and she enrolled in the preparation class that was offered by her school. Lisa said, “Arch Academy really pressed the ACT as opposed to people in Ship County High, who literally take the ACT for the first time during their senior year of high school and that’s not going to work.”

All of the research participants only took the ACT. After being dismayed with her ACT scores, Jennifer said she considered taking the SAT, but was told the ACT was more common in the South and the SAT was worse than the ACT. Therefore, she refrained from taking the SAT. Despite the participants efforts to do well on the ACT, most of the participants schools were overall known to produce some of the lowest test scores within the state. Therefore, the next theme of feeling overlooked by colleges and universities because of both the academic reputation of some of the high schools and geographic location emerged in participants’ Stories of College. Most described being exposed to either community colleges or military recruiters. For example, Tina described seeing mostly recruiters from community colleges visit her school and how it made her feel not seeing recruiters from four-year universities such as the state flag ship come to her high school.

Mostly community colleges would come to our school. I don’t remember big four-year universities really coming to my school. Probably because of the size of our school. They probably figure that no one wanted to come there from our school. This made me feel bad because I feel like they kind of underrate us like we don’t want to pursue higher education when we actually do. We just don’t have the resources or the people to take the time to actually push us. I feel like they should come to the small schools more because like I said I never recall a four year university recruiter coming to our school just to let us know they do notice us even though we are very small, just to get more information out about our school and let the students know that it’s not as bad as it may seem to go to a four year university and that even though it is bigger than a two year we don’t have to be afraid just to explore it.

[Tina, Pine County High]

Like Pine County High, Jennifer recalled mostly having representatives from community colleges visit her school instead of recruiters from four-year universities. Jennifer said, “perhaps four-year colleges did not visit their school as much because I assume it is because they find it easier to get students in a two-year college because they are cheaper than a four-year college and plus the ACT test scores at our school weren’t up to par. I definitely feel like they need to focus more on rural areas since we really don’t have many resources.”

Christina explained how recruiters simply need to visit schools in rural communities more.

Generally, I don’t think they try to reach the black kids. I guess... They see that they reach the top of the pyramid, but it doesn’t matter to go any lower. I think they need to get to the schools. The recruiter people need to go to the schools more. I think going to the schools and helping people apply will make a big difference, because many times people just don’t know again because of their surroundings. A lot of people just don’t know how. They just don’t know what to do and I think someone coming and helping them will make a big difference.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

They should push for more recruitment for rural students. I know every university is big on numbers and want to have the biggest freshmen class. I feel like they really push towards big school districts, but I really feel like their real numbers could really come from rural districts because if you really gave people the tools and the knowledge to do things... I mean rural towns are rural but there are a lot of people in those towns that are still probably looking for an opportunity, but they don’t get it because rural school and rural areas aren’t looked it.

[Anthony, Hill County High]

Lisa explained Arch Academy, who had a better academic reputation, often had college recruiters from four-year universities visiting her school to recruit students. She said, “we did have a lot of people come talk to us and they would always have a little booth sitting out in the foyer or whatever. I can’t remember all of the colleges and universities, but they were there all the time.”

A considerable amount of literature supports the participants’ narratives of being overlooked or forgotten due to both geographic location and academic reputation (Means, Clayton,

Conzelmann, Baynes and Umbach, 2016; Allen-Smith, Wimberly and Morris, 2000; Harper, Patton and Wooden, 2009). Each of the participants acknowledged college administrators need to do more outreach to rural students. Lisa even wished Arch Academy would do more to reach more students from her area, Ship County.

They don't give scholarships. I wish they did. If they did that would be great you know for people who can't afford to go there and want to really get out could go there. That would be great, so they need to find some money. So, I would say they just need to find funds to give other people an opportunity.

[Lisa, Arch Academy]

The Application and College Choice Process: Spontaneous and On My Own

In this next section, the study participants share their narratives of the college application and decision process. Through their stories, most of the participants described the college process as one they had to navigate “on their own” and their decision process as “spontaneous.” Although they all had a desire to attend college, they just never truly envisioned themselves attending a large four -year university such as The University of the South.

Alexander describes his current university as his “dream school” but never really considered enrolling until he got accepted.

But growing up in Clover County around my classmates and friends, you know the University of the South seemed kind of foreign. Like I knew it was here, but I never really thought about coming, which was so weird to me. Just always seeing it on TV and I knew where it was located, but I don't know it just seem so foreign and I never really thought about coming here. I looked at every school in Alabama. I applied to schools all over just to see what scholarships I would get, but as soon as I got accepted I knew I was coming here!

[Alexander, Clover County High]

He recalled starting his college search process by simply researching schools online and applying to places where he thought he could get a scholarship. He did not go on any college visits because he was busy with high school, participating in sports and trying to maintain a part-time job. Alexander said, “it was a no brainer to attend the University of the South especially when

they offered me a First-Generation Scholarship. I got accepted after my first ACT score and I got a scholarship to my dream school, so it was definitely a no brainer!”

The First-Generation scholarship is limited to only 12 Alabama students and those whose parents did not attend college or have less than two years of college. I had to write an essay on why I deserved the scholarship and any hardships that I went through. For me, I knew the importance of going to college since my parents did not go. My father had a really bad motorcycle accident in ninth grade, so he has been on disability since then, so he really hasn't been able to work. I spoke on that in my essay and they gave me scholarship.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

Alexander said his school did try to assist students with the college search process by hosting College fairs and inviting college representatives to their school to recruit students. He remembered mostly in-state colleges and universities attending the fairs with the exception of only a couple of schools from Mississippi. According to Alexander, only four other students from his graduating class at Clover County High enrolled at The University of the South.

Christina, who is also enrolled at the University of the South, described her college selection process as a very “spontaneous type thing.” Initially, she had narrowed her college selection process to picking three types of schools: a PWI, HBCU and a small school. She had considered an out of state school but once she realized the additional out of state fees that was no longer an option. Suddenly, she decided to apply to the University of the South to see what would happen.

At first, I was like I'm not going to the University of the South! Then I decided to apply and see what happens and if I get in, I'm going like hands down and then I got in! I was like oh! I'm going, and I don't care about anything else. We don't have to visit. I didn't do a visit. I just knew that's it! That's it! OH!! I'm going to the University of the South!

[Christina, Blanket County High]

She recollects going through the college application process alone.

My daddy was like go whenever you want, just tell me what I gotta do and my mama was like right there so if I didn't know what something meant, or she needed to sign something right quick. But yeah, I found out about a FAFSA on my own, I like I had to apply on my own, my waivers on my own for all these applications, like I had to go

through all that on my own...um I guess emotionally...I mean I guess I don't think she (her mom) really knew either.

[Christina, Blanket County High]

Christina did not visit any other colleges. Her first visit to the University of the South was move-in day and attending orientation. She said, "I only googled the campus and was like oh this is big and when I actually got here, I was like oh my goodness! On move-in day, people just started taking stuff out my car and I'm just standing there I'm like oh my goodness I'm about to live in there! My mom was like are you sure you are ready for me to go? I'm like yeah, please! I didn't even know anybody including my roommates." According to Christina, maybe only five other students from Blanket County High enrolled at the University of the South that fall semester with her. She does not recall the college recruiter from the University of the South visiting her school. However, she said the school did have college fairs in the gym twice a year and the students could sometimes visit with recruiters during lunch. Christina did not receive any scholarships to attend the University of the South. She did receive some financial aid and had to take out student loans which she said, "these loans are going to be the death of me!"

Anthony also attends the University of the South. Initially, he wanted to go to a different university because his older brother graduated from the University of the South.

In the beginning, I wasn't going to come to school here purposely because my brother graduated from here and I didn't want to seem like I was coming because of him. So, I looked at a couple of other schools and then I looked at HBCUs because I was like I wanted to go to a HBCU because I heard the experience was one of the best, but then I changed my mind because I wanted to challenge myself and be surrounded by more, so I feel like being here I have really been challenged in some situations. It has all been a learning tool, so being here I kind of learned more about how to engage with other people. It really has unlocked a lot of opportunities as far as job opportunities, just a lot of different other goals and so just opening the door here and then my brother graduating from here, he helped me understand that going to college can unlock all this stuff for you.

[Anthony, Hill County High]

Anthony said he finally made his decision to attend the University of the South after researching the school online and his current major because he really didn't know much about the school or campus. Also, he wanted to "ease his mom's soul" since he is the last child to attend college. She was familiar with the university and the town since Anthony's brother is a graduate. He said, "selecting the university removed him from the small-town drama, placed him outside of his comfort zone and opened his mind to more." Like Christina, he did not go any college tours and did not visit University of the South until the day of orientation, even then he did not do a formal tour of campus. Although he did not receive a scholarship from the university, Anthony did receive a \$5,000 scholarship from outside sources that he pursued on his own and financial aid. He doesn't recall many of his classmates attending the university even though the college recruiter from the University of the South visited his school.

Although Lisa did tour other colleges and universities with both her school and family, she decided to attend the University of the South because of her familiarity with the campus through summer camps and because it offered her major. Also, several of her friends from Arch Academy attends the university. Like Christina and Anthony, Lisa did not receive any scholarships to attend the University of the South. However, she did receive a scholarship from an HBCU, but Lisa said, "I decided to decline it and attend the university because I enjoy diversity." Although Tina attended the University of the South during the summer after graduating high school, she decided to enroll at Central University. Her application process included applying to several schools with the assistance of her high school. She that was something her school did really well.

They had this week where (I think it was a week) or just a day where they had all of the seniors to apply to different schools. It was like a list and we had waivers for all of them, so they would make designated times for different groups of seniors to come in and apply for all the schools because we had a fee waiver for them. I know I applied to many

schools because I realized like it was free, so I might as well. They actually did encourage us to apply to many different places because you know it was free for us and it's just always been like that. We had that designated time to apply for all those schools.

[Tina, Pine County High]

Even though she was familiar with the University of the South because of various camps and the fact that her brother attended there, she decided to attend Central University because she wanted to branch off and not be exactly like her brother, plus Central University wasn't too close to home, but not too far.

Even though Central University is a medical college, I just wanted to go there because I like the atmosphere of the campus. First of all, it's not as big as the University of the South and I don't feel I would get lost. I know I will be around family. I have aunts and uncles who stay up there so I know I will never be alone up there. It's only my brother who stays up here and then like I said about the distance it's not too close and not too far and I just like being in the city rather than somewhere that is really small and I kind of don't want to see my classmates every day. I know that none of them are going there, so if I want to get in touch with them I can just call them or something.

[Tina, Pine County High]

She did go on several college tours, one with her service organization and three on her own. She described the feeling of amazement during her college tour of the University of the South. There's not much to see where I come from and if you come to somewhere like here, on campus everything is out there so many different buildings and opportunities. When I first took a tour of the campus and saw the recreation center with the pool and tennis courts I was just amazed because you don't see that where I come from. It was just like... I don't know, it just took my breath away just to get out of the small town and venture out.

[Tina, Pine County High]

She said even though she could picture herself at the university, "there would be a voice in the back of my head saying don't get too far ahead of yourself because I was thinking about going to a small university, but I wanted to do something different from the norm." Even though she was so amazed by the university, she felt some intimidation by it too. "I feel intimidated because of

the size of it and knowing that I'm going to be on my home and I'm going to have to change my habits." Tina did receive a scholarship to attend the University of the South, but she said the amount wasn't much because of her test score. However, she did receive a small scholarship offer to attend Central University as well as some outside scholarships.

Like Tina, Jennifer applied to several colleges and universities during the Alabama College Application week program. Her application process included applying to eight different schools including her dream college East Central University. She recalled going through the college process mostly on her own. Jennifer explained, "my mother wasn't quite tech savvy, so she kind of wasn't able to help me. We don't live my father and even though he wanted me to go to college, he didn't help me with the college application process. So basically, it was me doing it." Jennifer did visit several schools before making her final college decision. Her school sponsored a trip to the University of the South. She visited two other colleges because one offered her a peer tutoring scholarship and the other tour was for band camp since she was the drum major at her high school. Jennifer decided to attend her current college because her dream school did not offer her any scholarship money. The University of the South did offer her a small scholarship, but her current school East Central University offered her more money. Additionally, Jennifer said she received several community service scholarships.

Feeling Lost

"It's been a bad adjustment been a really bad adjustment like it was hurtful!"

[Tina, Pine County High]

In the statement above, Tina describes her adjustment to college. Like Tina, all of the participants except Lisa had a hard time transitioning to college and their new work load. The research participants quickly realized their high schools did not prepare them for college and they still had to navigate the college process "on their own" because of lack of guidance from

their parents, who were unfamiliar with the college journey since most have not attended college and because their new universities did offer any bridge programs to help smooth the transitional process. Therefore, the final theme of feeling lost emerged in their Stories of College.

Although Alexander participated in a dual enrollment program, he believes the resources that were available to him at his high school did not prepare him for college. Even though he had the enrollment program, he said, “I was so behind when I got her! So Behind! My high school just did not prepare me for college and had I not done dual enrollment I would have been even more lost.” Since he received the first-generation scholarship, he had an advisor and a cohort of other students that helped him transition from high school and navigate college.

The first-generation group itself was a big resource for me when I got here. They got us acclimated to the campus and certain resources, they showed us how to navigate and everything so that was very helpful to me my freshman year here. They pretty much taught me everything. We had to register for it a class with other first generation students and in that class we had advisors and counselors come talk to us and they told us how to work degree works, how to build the right schedule, talk to your professors, just things you need to know when you get here and we have different cohorts so the class before us served as mentors to help us navigate and if we had any questions we could ask them and we did the same thing for the class after us.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

He realized how behind he was compared to some of his peers during the first semester of his freshman year.

When I got here I realized how underprepared I was and it forced me to go out and find those resources and to network so I could try and make-up for what I didn’t received in high school and that’s why I am so grateful for the First Scholars program because they were that person in my corner to tell me this is how you do this/should do this and they were just there to answer any questions I had and to really help me succeed in college.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

Additionally, he recalls having some anxiety of “not knowing” because I haven’t been exposed to a college environment like this.” Nonetheless, he wished his high school had prepared him more for college and offered more resources.

I just wish we had a program geared more towards you know helping students go to that next level in the education system whether it be interview skills, resume building, scholarship applications, how to dress, just those things you're going to need in life other than just a trade and working towards passing the graduation exam because that's all we really all we focused on at Clover County High School.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

Unlike Alexander, Christina and Anthony did not have a first-generation group to help them transition from high school to college. Instead they relied more on their friends and classmates to help them navigate college. According to Anthony, he just had to go and figure things out on his own. On the other hand, Tina has had a bad hard time adjusting to college because there just wasn't much opportunities at her high school and she wasn't prepared for the coursework in college.

I don't think they do much as far as the steps to get you there or preparing you because like the curriculum at my high school, I realized that it wasn't as much like I didn't have to try as hard so once I got here it was like an eye opener cause I had to learn how to study, had to learn how to manage my time and that's been a really bad adjustment like it was hurtful but I did learn from it and that's how it's just been really tough! I've been taking college classes since last summer online through UA Early College and then I started realizing how tough it is trying to do high school classes and online classes. It wasn't as hard because I really like the atmosphere of being in the college classroom rather than online, it was more personable. It was just a hard adjustment because like I said I didn't really have to study as much and I didn't have to put in much effort, so it was just a really hard adjustment. I had to realize it the hard way by getting some bad grades. I don't like bad grades, but I do realize that when you go to college it's not going to be as easy. It's not going to be straight A's as much.

[Tina, Pine County High]

Therefore, she felt somewhat behind in her courses.

I didn't have a background in science and we are taking Intro to Biology right now. We had science classes in high school, but it wasn't helpful because most of the times we just do vocabulary and we do labs every now and then and of course down in the south most of the time your coach is usually your science or geography teacher so that's how was my coach was my science teacher. The curriculum just wasn't rigorous how the college curriculum is, so it's like I'm paying for it now.

Jennifer describe her transition from her rural high school to college as “definitely different.” She explained the difference of going from no more than 20 students in her high school classes to now having over hundred.

We didn't have to use a book in high school. It was put right there in your face. Now you have to read the book in order to understand what she's saying, listen to what she's saying, stuff that she has on the PowerPoint is very important, that's what you will be tested on, what's in the book and what she mentioned and how do you understand like not just know the vocabulary word, but how do you interpret the vocabulary word. Also, the tests are different. They are testing for your understanding not the material if that makes sense.

[Jennifer, Bend County High]

Although she had study groups and tutoring that was offered through her summer program, Jennifer said “everything so far has been rushed and nobody is really prepared. Looking back, I feel like they need to focus more on rural areas since we really don't have many resources.”

On the other hand, Lisa was the only student who believed her high school provided good resources that helped her transition from high school as well as prepared her for college. She did not have any issues navigating through her first semester of college.

My advisor for my major was great, so I would go to her if there was ever an issue and of course I could call my parents. As far as my professors, I got to know some of them probably not my first semester because I was just taking basic classes, but definitely my second semester. My biggest problem was adapting. Everything isn't going to go your way all the time. You just have to be able to adapt. That was a really big problem for me. I couldn't adapt and so what could have been like a minor setback, well it still was a minor setback, but it could have been a lot less of than what it escalated to because I couldn't wrap my mind around it. Other than that, my first year was great! The second year I took Organic Chemistry, that was awful because nothing can prepare you for organic! That junk is awful! My junior year was fine and senior year I was like ok.

[Lisa, Arch Academy]

The stories shared by the research participants provides a greater understanding of the challenges African American students from rural areas face, their schooling, college choice process, access and transition to college.

Summary

In this chapter, I have shared the stories of African American students who have attended rural schools by describing their rural environments, educational experiences and how the resources available to them impacted their access and transition into higher education. The final chapter will include a summary of the study, a discussion of the results with a connection to the research questions and existing body of literature, implications for further research and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY

You know it's mainly that group of kids who did dual enrollment who are still in school, who are succeeding. I go back and talk to some of my old classmates and I see how they are struggling and how they weren't prepared for the real world or just college in general. A lot of them dropped out because we didn't have the necessary skills to be a successful college student, it just made me think why aren't my friends in the same boat as me? I always knew I took a different route than many others, but maybe if they had those opportunities presented to them they could have done better, but you know it's a cycle. Their parents probably didn't have great education and you know growing up in poverty and it just trickles down.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

In this final chapter, I will discuss the findings of my study, implications for policy and practice, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. I will begin by restating the purpose of the study and the research questions. Next, I will provide an overview of the research method, which will then be followed by an in-depth discussion of the findings with a connection to the research questions. Lastly, I will conclude by discussing limitations of the study, implications for policy and practice and offer recommendations for future research.

Purpose of Study

According to the biennial report by the Rural School and Community Trust: *Why Rural Matters 2015-2016: Understanding the Changing Landscape*, rural students face many challenges in their rural communities such as inadequate resources, struggles with teacher recruitment and retention, preparation for college and several other challenges. For example, the latest findings within the state of Alabama alone revealed more than one in three Alabama students attend a rural school, which is one of the highest rates in the nation; six in 10 of the state's 265,000 rural students are from low-income families; per pupil spending and educator salaries are among the lowest, rural high school and non-white graduation rates are below average with rural participation in Advanced Placement courses among the nation's lowest

(Showalter, Klein, Johnson and Hartman, 2017). Despite these statistics, the issues and challenges regarding rural students are often ignored by researchers and policy makers. Additionally, there are few studies that include the experiences of students who identify as both rural and African American (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016) . Freeman argues the very individuals, African American students, who are often affected the most regarding policy, are rarely consulted and lack a voice in the dialogue regarding pertinent decisions that will affect them (Freeman, 1997). The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the educational experiences of rural African American students and their reflection of how the resources they received during high school helped them prepare and transition into college. The findings of this study will help key policymakers and college administrators be more cognizant of the challenges and issues affecting this overlooked population of students. Understanding the experiences of these students may help high school administrators develop ways to better support and prepare rural African American students for higher education. Additionally, learning from the experiences of this group may help colleges and universities create better recruitment plans geared towards assisting them through the college application process, more scholarship opportunities and better support systems when they enroll at their institutions, which in turn will help with the overall retention and graduation rates of these students. In order to share the lived experiences of my research participants, I utilized the CRT technique of storytelling and narrative analysis in framing the following research questions:

1. How do African American students who have attended rural schools reflect on their educational experiences and the resources offered to them?
2. How did these resources help them prepare and gain access to higher education?

Relating Their Experiences to the Research Questions

In the previous chapter, I shared the principal findings from the semi-structured interviews with the research participants. In the following section, I provide a summary and analysis of the key findings related to the research questions that guided the study. The first question stated, “How do African American students who have attended rural schools perceive their educational experiences and the resources offered to them?” This question aimed to have the research participants describe their high school experiences. The interview protocol included questions framed around having the participants describe their high schools in terms of location, size, racial make-up, the curriculum, relationships with teachers and guidance counselors as well as the types of resources available to them and how they perceived these resources prepared them for college. I grouped the findings into three categories and the following themes emerged in each category 1) Stories of Home: Sites of Struggle, Getting Out, The Black Side of Town and Friday Night Lights; 2) Stories of High School: Environments of Lack, Still Separate and Unequal. Career Tech and Teaching for the Big Test; 3) Stories of College: Lagging Behind, Winging It and Overlooked, The Spontaneous Process On My Own.

Most of the study participants used negative adjectives such as “lacking” to describe both their hometowns and their high schools by detailing the violence, poverty, separation and limited opportunities that existed within their towns. The issue of lack often spilled over into their schooling because most of the participants detailed not having access to updated textbooks, labs and the school buildings were so archaic that they often did not have adequate heat to keep the students warm during the winter. Additionally, they perceived the curriculum as lacking academic rigor because for some of the participants they simply worked on vocabulary or worksheets throughout the day. Some of the participants recalled having substitute teachers serving as their main teacher several times throughout the school year instead of certified

teachers. At some of the schools, some of the teachers focused too much on trying to make sure students passed the State Graduation Exam or on Career Technical programs instead of spending more time assisting students interested in pursuing higher education. Since most of the participants attended predominately African American rural high schools, they thought the resources at the private academies or schools were better because those they believed those students had access to better resources such as more engaging teachers, Advanced Placement courses and science and technology fairs. Lisa was the only participant who had a favorable reflection of the resources she received at Arch Academy; however, she did not fully enjoy her overall educational experience or environment there. Despite the environments of lack, the participants encountered in both their towns and schooling, they all wanted to obtain a college degree in order to break the cycle of poverty and to simply experience more opportunities and diversity than what their towns and schools offered.

Research Question 2

The second research question stated, “How did these resources help them prepare and gain access to higher education?” After understanding how the participants perceived their educational experiences and the resources offered to them, I wanted to hear the personal narratives on how those resources helped them to prepare, gain access and transition into college. The interview protocol consisted of questions framed around having the participants describe the type of college preparatory courses offered at their high schools, preparation for college testing, their college application process, (taking college entrance exams, applying to college, college tours, scholarships, and making their final decision) and ways they navigated college once they enrolled. The key themes central to this question are: Lagging Behind, Winging It and Overlooked, the Spontaneous Process on My Own.

Based on the narratives of most of the study participants except Lisa, the students perceived the resources they received as inadequate, which in turn caused them to lag behind many of their peers. Most participants described how the lack of resources at their schools did not prepare them for college or how they were prepared only in certain subjects and that was dependent upon the teacher. Although, a few of the participants took dual enrollment courses while in high school, that still was not enough, and they quickly realized how the lack of resources they received did not prepare them for college as soon as the beginning of their first semester of their freshman year. Also, some of the participants did not have consistent access to one of the most valuable resources at their schools, guidance counselors. The research participants had counselors who were not available as much due to health issues or simply had too many students to assist; therefore, the students felt they were behind on receiving information pertaining to the college process and scholarships. Hence, their college application process consisted of doing many things on their own and even winging it when it came to taking College Entrance exams.

This leads to the second theme: *Winging It and Overlooked*. Due to the limited resources available to the participants, many of the students had to “wing it” or figure out the college application process and gain access to various opportunities such as scholarships on their own. First, several of the students mentioned how they did not prepare for the ACT. They simply had to and because some of the schools did not adequately prepare the students for the test until the ACT replaced the high school graduation exit exam. School officials were forced to offer some sort of preparation since graduation was depended on the student’s ACT scores. In their narratives regarding test scores, several of the students described how they felt overlooked by certain colleges and universities because of both their test scores and the geographic location of

their schools; therefore; access to certain types of higher education institutions seemed to be restricted more towards community colleges or the military. However, the resources offered at Lisa's Arch Academy allowed her to receive access to a variety of both in-state and out-of-state four-year institutions.

Due to the dearth of resources, the theme of *The Spontaneous Process on My Own* refers to the participants navigating the college application process on their own with little or no assistance from guidance counselors and parents who were unfamiliar with the process since some had never attended college. The participants described researching information on financial aid, application fee waivers and scholarship opportunities on their own. Also, some of the participants described the college search and decision process as a "spontaneous thing" since they did not have colleges actively recruiting them and advising them through the process. Although the participants knew they wanted to go to college, they never really visualized themselves attending their "dream schools" or for some simply leaving their towns. The application and decision process for these students consisted of applying and waiting to see what happens. When they received their acceptance letters, some of the students then made the decision to attend their respective schools on their own with little input from parents and without making any visits or knowing much about the colleges (e.g. location, size etc.) or receiving scholarships. Contrary to some research, the rural environments and college process for these students differed in some ways since the students did not have the supportive rural communities that is sometimes described in the literature (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012).

The final theme of *Feeling Lost* describes how most of the participants felt during their transition to college from their high schools. This theme is closely related to the theme of *Lagging Behind*.

Critical Analysis

The discussion of the findings related to the first research question engages the following tenets of CRT as a framework to analyze the first question: race is a normal and permanent fixture, counter-story telling, Intersectionality and Whiteness as property.

The Permanency and Normalcy of Racism

The stories of the research participants reveal the normalcy and prevalence of racism and the ways it operated within their rural towns and the existence of separate and unequal resources and schools. All of the participants acknowledged the separation that existed and some of the study participants such as Tina explained, “that it’s just always been like that. I thought that was kind of how things were going to be everywhere, but it’s not so.” Tina’s statement supports the CRT tenet of the normalcy and permanency of racism. The issue of race was present in the participant’s towns with the separation of the black versus white side of town. Also, it was present in the way the participants experienced schooling through the resources they received compared to some of the private academies. For example, the participants viewed the resources they received as bad or lackluster. In order to have access to better resources, some of the study participants attended private schools. Alexander briefly attended a private predominately white middle school because his mom viewed the local public school as bad and that the teachers did not cater to the students. Similarly, Lisa said she was forced against her will to attend her private high school, yet she feels her education was definitely better than the one she would have received at the rural high school in her community. Based on the participants’ experiences, they viewed the white kids as having access to better things. Nonetheless, the issue of race was prevalent theme in the research participants stories.

Colorblindness, Meritocracy, Equal Opportunity

According to DeCuir and Dixson (2004), the concept of colorblindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as other. Therefore, the issue of colorblindness creates the illusion of meritocratic society that places everyone on an equal playing field. The CRT approach rejects the notion of colorblindness and meritocracy. Within the participants' stories the issue of colorblindness materialized in many ways. A common message emerging from the participants stories is how they lacked access to various resources such as adequate funding and textbooks. This lack caused them to lag behind their peers such as Lisa who attended a private school and had access to newer textbooks, labs and a rigorous curriculum. Additionally, colorblindness was demonstrated in the participants stories of college testing. As mentioned previously, Jencks and Phillips (1998) identified test score gaps between white and black test takers and sometimes these results can create barriers for students and prevent them from receiving competitive scholarships. Several studies have indicated College entrance exams are not meritocratic nor do they provide an equal opportunity for students (Brown, 2004). This study revealed how schooling was not meritocratic nor equal for the students in my research setting. For example, Jennifer was prevented from attending her first college choice because she did not receive any merit-based scholarships based off her test scores despite taking the tests multiple time. Most of the participants did not receive merit-based scholarships this was due partly to the research participants not having adequate access to resources such as textbooks and proper instruction from teachers since some of the study participants mentioned having substitutes for most of the school year or simple completing worksheets. Therefore, this supports the CRT tenet of rejecting meritocracy and equal opportunity. The issue of colorblindness enacted through testing and the curriculum the

participants were exposed that created barriers to the participants such as limited scholarship opportunities.

Counter Storytelling and Experiential Knowledge

The CRT tenet of Experiential Knowledge and Counter-Storytelling is the key tenet guiding this study. According to Solorzano and Yosso, Critical Race Theory recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color is pertinent to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial injustices (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Ladson- Billings (2009) explicates the voices of marginalized groups provides a way to learn more about their lived experiences and is the first step in analyzing the intricacies of racism especially within the realm of education; which is an area where the voices of people of color is often muted (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Delpit, 1988). By sharing the stories of the students in this study, I can provide greater insight into the educational experiences of rural African American students and ways they navigated the college process. Additionally, I can hone in on the barriers they face by analyzing their lived experiences. The current literature exploring rural students suggests the barriers rural students face consist of lower academic achievement, postsecondary aspirations, and college attendance rates (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016). However, the narratives of the students in this study offer a counter-narrative to this research. The students in this study had high academic achievement rates, enrolled in dual enrollment programs, members of the National Honor Society and even several other service organizations. Although some of their parents did not attend college and viewed through rural towns as environments of lack, these students still had high aspirations to attend college. The participants often mentioned how they simply wanted to experience more and not attending college was simply not an option for them. Through the stories of the participants in this study, it is evident that rural African American

students have postsecondary aspirations. They just need better resources, access to information and simply an opportunity.

Additionally, this study provides a counternarrative to deficit thinking. According to Yosso (2005):

Deficit thinking is one of the most rampant forms of racism in education because it takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills, parents neither value nor support their child's education. Educators most often assume that schools work and that students, parents and the community need to change to conform to an already effective and equitable system.

The narratives from the research participants illustrate how deficit thinking is erroneous and why students and families should not take sole responsibility for poor academic performance. Instead, educators should look to other systemic factors that may cause students to do poorly in school. For example, several of the students mentioned how they did not have books to take home to review material or study. Also, the participants described not having teachers who actually taught on their levels. Also, their stories highlight ways in which schools are not working and are inequitable.

Intersectionality

Although racial oppression is the focus of Critical Race Theory, critical race theorists analyze ways other factors such as class, gender, and sexual orientation intersect and can influence the lived experiences of marginalized groups (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). In this study, factors such as race, class and place (rurality) intersected and influenced the lived experiences of the research participants. Issues of race were often described in the participants Stories of Home, which included descriptions of the Black versus White side of town, Stories of Schooling which detailed separate schools for black and white students with inequitable educational resources.

Place/ Rurality was factor that impacted their experience with higher education because the participants often mentioned being overlooked by certain colleges and universities. The students believed both their test scores and the geographic location of their schools prohibited certain college recruiters from visiting their schools. Lastly, issues of class impacted their educational experiences. This was evident in Lisa's narratives of Schooling in which she detailed how Arch Academy, the private school she paid to attend that was 45 minutes away, provided her with better resources that were not available to the other research participants who attended the public schools within their rural communities. Race, class and place were illuminated throughout the participants narratives should be taken into consideration when analyzing the lived experiences of rural African American students. There are few studies which examine race, place and class as factors impacting the educational experiences of rural African American students and the college process (Freeman, 1997; Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes & Umbach, 2016). Ladson-Billings (2013) posits intersectionality is often an overlooked concept because society tends to focus only on binaries instead of the "the complexities of real life and the multiple identities that people represent" (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 39; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 10). The CRT tenet of intersectionality provides the lens to scrutinize forms of oppression and marginalization beyond the scope of only race.

Whiteness as Property

The CRT tenet of Whiteness as Property was illustrated in several ways throughout the participants narratives of their educational experiences and as they tried to gain access to higher education. Critical Race Scholar Cheryl Harris (1993) argue education has often been treated as an exclusive privilege or "an exclusive club with guarded membership" (Harris, 1993, p. 1736). Hence, Whiteness as Property operates within the realm of education through testing, funding,

admissions policies, scholarship opportunities and curriculums. Whiteness as Property can be used to analyze the many educational inequalities the research participants faced as they tried to enter the elite club of higher education. For example, many of the participants described not having access to a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. Instead, their curriculum consisted of doing vocabulary or worksheets and some of the students mentioned how they were taught by unqualified teachers such as substitutes. However, students at the all-white private academies had access to science and technology fairs, updated books, and a bevy of college placement courses and access to various types of colleges and universities instead of being restricted to only certain types of colleges or increased exposure to Career Technical/Ready to Work programs.

Interest Convergence

The CRT tenet of Interest Convergence can be used to analyze the role of sports within the rural communities. Several of the students described the racial separation that existed in their towns and schools with the existence of private academies for white students, who they rarely had any interaction with. Ironically, the white students often attended football games at the black schools on Friday nights. Anthony, who attended a predominately white rural school, described how his school was known to pass the African American football player along so that they could continue to play football and make the school look good. If the players continued to play well, they school would support them. Similarly, Christina explained if black athletes were considered the “superstars,” they would fit in with the white students at her school. The practice of passing black athletes along and only supporting them as long as they were successful on the field, which brought notoriety to the high schools supports Bell’s theory of Interest Convergence. This theory is used to explain how the interests black will only be considered when their interests converge with whites. Additionally, interest convergence can be used to analyze the recruitment strategies

of some of the colleges and universities. For example, some of the schools did not actively recruit students at rural African American schools because they did not have high test scores.

This next section includes a discussion on how the findings of this study engages both Critical Race Theory and Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory as they relate to the research questions

Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory and Critical Race Theory

The participants described their rural communities as sites of struggle due to poverty, violence, high unemployment and lack of resources. The conditions of their community impacted their habitus or views of their social world and motivated them to want to "Get Out" and pursue higher education. According to Dumais (2006), habitus is developed early in life based on one's social class standing and from there individuals learn their place in society and this effects their actions, attitudes and even where they may end up in life. Dumais (2006) argues students will not pursue higher education if they have family members who have not attended college; therefore, these students will develop behaviors such as missing school, not maintaining good grades, etc. because they have self-fulfilling prophecies that "college is not for them" (Gaddis, 2006).

However, this was not the case for my study participants. Only two of the study participants had parents who had a bachelors or advanced degree; yet each of the participants used the experiences of their rural environments as an impetus to work hard in school in order to leave their rural environments and pursue a college degree. For example, Tina and Lisa explained, "not attending college was not an option for them." Many of the participants were so determined to leave their communities and attend college in pursuit of a better life that they most of the research regarding college and scholarships on their own.

Due to the conditions of their community such as limited resources, this impacted their educational experience. For example, the participants described how they did not have the best

resources in their schools such as books, labs and consistent access to guidance counselors; this influenced their habitus and caused them to be unfamiliar with the “rules” of the college enrollment process. Once they enrolled in college, participants such as Tina described the transition process as “painful and that I am actually paying for it now” (referring to the lack of college preparatory work during high school). The participants’ recalled feeling unprepared for higher education. Alexander and Tina described “feeling lost’ during his first semester of college.

Also, Bourdieu’s Social Reproduction Theory illustrates how education can reproduce inequalities by allowing only certain people to enter. In this study, most of the participants except for Lisa described not having access to a variety of college recruiters at their school nor an equal balance of both college preparatory and career technical courses. Instead, Lisa’s private school focused on a more rigorous college preparatory track. Although the other participants enrolled in some college preparatory courses, some of the participants said sometimes the career and technical curriculums were pressed on them more instead of a college preparatory curriculum. Historically, the curriculum has often been an issue especially for rural African American students ever since the creation of the Hampton Model; which focused on labor and minimal schooling for African American students instead of a classical liberal arts education; thus, reproducing a working class (Anderson, 1988). The curriculum and higher education can reproduce inequalities, both also supports Harris’s argument as Whiteness as property and how education operates as a guarded “exclusive club” open only to certain people based on both on class and race (Harris, 1993). For example, a recent study revealed colleges and universities are increasingly diverting their recruitment efforts to focus more on wealthy or full-paying students; while overlooking rural or low-income students (Jaschik, 2018). In the case of my study, higher

education was not only guarded based on race and class, but also due to rurality. For example, the participants in my study described being overlooked by colleges and universities because of both their geographic location and test scores

Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory can also be coupled with the CRT tenet of the normalcy and permanence of racism in order to analyze how social inequalities are reproduced in higher education. Instead, they accept those structures as just and normal. For example, there are various forms of oppressive structures operating throughout education such as test scores, admissions and financial aid policies, limited scholarship opportunities structures, and tracking. Yet, education is often viewed as the great equalizer with everyone having equal access to the same opportunities due to various educational mandates. Through the blinders of meritocracy and equal opportunity, inequalities are continually reproduced in education especially for rural students.

Other Findings

Although this study focused on exploring the experiences of rural African American students and how the resources they received to help them prepare and gain access to Higher Education, it did give more insight into their college choice process, which several scholars argue is often not addressed. Additionally, the intersectionality of race, rurality and college choice is rarely included in the literature (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2017). The three-phase model of College Choice is often utilized to understand the process that students navigate when making their college choice. Again, critics of the model argue not only is it too linear with students easily progressing between each of the stages, but it does not consider various factors such as cultural differences, backgrounds, socioeconomic status, nor place when explaining the college choice process especially for marginalized groups such as rural African American students. The college choice process for my research participants was different from

Hosseler, Schmit and Vesper's linear model. Although each of the research participants had a desire to attend college, they each navigated the college choice process differently. For example, Tina described her college choice as a spontaneous decision. She was aware of her university because of its popularity within the state and the sports teams; however, she never visualized attending the institution until one day she told herself she would just apply to see what happens. Once she got accepted, her mind was made up to enroll without touring the college, receiving any scholarships and never even visiting the town where her college was located. Several of the other research participants described how they did not complete the search phase of the three-phase model by going on campus visits. Instead, they made their decision and simply arrived at their institutions on move-in day and even then, they didn't know much about the college nor the town. Since some of the research participants thought test scores would be an issue of getting accepted into college; therefore, the college choice process for them started with submitting an application, waiting to see which schools would accept them, applying for scholarships and financial aid, then researching the school online (not visiting the campus) and finally making their decision to attend. Some of the students considered the amount of scholarships they would receive as factor before making their final college decision. None of the participants mentioned the role of financial aid as factor in their decision-making process, although they each received some form of financial aid. In this study, each student navigated the college process in a different way; therefore, the findings offer a different non-linear approach of analyzing the ways special populations of students such as rural African Americans may navigate the college process by considering factors such as their environment and habitus, which can impact their decision-making process.

The themes that emerged from this research brings insight into the ways African American students in the Black Belt region of Alabama experience schooling, gain access and transition to higher education. First, the participants' narratives of home reveal the deep systemic racism that continues to exist within their hometowns and its' implication to college access. Each of the participants described issues related to race within both their hometowns and schools. For these participants, living in the Black Belt meant experiencing lack of resources or opportunity due to marginal employment and in some cases violence or high crime. Additionally, their stories illuminate the longstanding effects of industrialization and modernization on this once lucrative region.

In this study, the narratives of the research participants highlight the intricacies of the college access problem especially for rural African American students. Despite the *Brown* decision, the Civil Rights Act, Higher Education Act and other laws intended to increase equal educational opportunity, factors such as rurality, race and class all intersect and impact college access. First, rurality creates a college access problem. Geographic region simply prohibits exposure to rural African American students to only certain types of colleges and universities because other postsecondary institutions may not see the value in recruiting rural students. For example, some of the study participants described only noticing mostly local community colleges recruiting at their schools. Also, inadequate resources such as updated textbooks, course offerings, etc. in rural areas contribute to the college access problem. Lastly, class issues were evident in the study and alluded to the college access problem. According to Means et al (2016), financial aid and scholarships are pertinent to the college going process for rural African American students. Therefore, the rising cost of college along with dwindling financial aid packages and fewer need based programs, will make college access even more difficult

especially for rural African American students. Nonetheless, this study indicates how such as rurality, poverty and race implicate college access

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of my study have implications for both policy and practice especially for policy makers and College Administrators. First, all my research participants expressed the need for more funding, so they would have access to better resources such as better supplies, updated textbooks and even renovated school buildings. The research participants mentioned because of the resources that were available to them they felt held back. Therefore, policy makers need to adjust the ways schools are funded so that students especially in rural impoverished areas will have access to equitable resources.

Additionally, my study reveals the importance of having more programs to assist rural African American students when they enter college. Alexander is the only research participant who was a member of a first-generation program that consisted of a cohort of 12 students. The purpose of the first-generation program is to provide strong support and structure to first-generation students through funding and various enrichment activities throughout the student's college career. As a member of the program, Alexander had to take an Introduction to College course which covered a range of topics to help students get acclimated to campus and navigate college. In addition, he had access to a full-time staff member and student mentor if he had any issues or questions. Alexander credits this program as a huge resource when he came to college. Therefore, colleges and universities should have more programs like Alexander's first-generation program on their campuses that will assist rural African American students with the transition to college and graduate. Again, the other research participants did not have a cohort to help them transition nor navigate college once they matriculated. They described having to research things

on their own or rely on friends to help them navigate both the college choice process and college in general. Currently, many universities offer bridge programs to assist not only first-generation students as well as transfer and organizations for out of state students. These programs not only help students transition to college but offer mentoring and volunteer opportunities. The creation of bridge programs specifically for rural student will not only assist this population of students as they transition to college, but it will help with the colleges and universities retention efforts.

Another issue mentioned during my study was the financial barrier to attend college. All the participants lived in rural communities with high poverty, unemployment rates and all attended high schools where most of the students qualified for free lunch. However, none of the participants received any need-based scholarships nor received full-tuition scholarships to attend any of their college choices. Lisa received one out-of- state scholarship, yet others such as Tina did not receive any scholarships. They all rely on financial aid programs and Alexander explained how he works three jobs just to finance his college education in addition to taking a full load of classes. Tina explicated her student loans will be “the death of her.” This is primarily due to changes in which financing a college education has shifted to what Paulsen and St. John describes as the period of high tuition and more reliance on student loans instead of grant programs (Paulsen and St. John, 2002). This brings to light the issue regarding college costs and how it has increased over the years; therefore, creating increased financial burdens for low-income students. College administrators especially at state flagships need to do more to ensure college is accessible and affordable to the citizens within their state by creating more need-based scholarship programs instead only merit scholarships.

In addition, high schools need focus more on preparing students for college. First, schools need to make sure they have guidance counselors that are accessible and helps all students, not

just the popular students. Also, they need to start early preparing students for college. Some of the students mentioned getting information regarding fee waivers late or ACT tutoring late in their senior year. Students need to be informed more on the college process, financial aid and college pricing. None of the students mentioned the cost of college being a factor in their decision- making process. The decision process for some of the students was based on merely the fact that they got accepted.

Limitations of Study

Possible limitations of my study which included the small sample size and spending more time with the research participants. Because recruitment of research participants took place during the summer months, it was difficult working with the participants' schedules due to work and summer camp activities. Several students expressed an interest in participating in the study; however, they did not attend their scheduled interviews and stopped email communication. Therefore, my sample only consisted of four females and two males from six rural counties in Alabama. Since I conducted the interviews during the summer, I do not feel I established strong rapport with some of the research participants. For example, I had to remind some of the participants during the interviews that I would maintain the anonymity of their responses by using pseudonyms and tried to encourage them to talk more freely. The research participants then mentioned that they felt bad and did not want to seem as if they were bashing their town or schools during the interviews. I had to assure these students that their real names and towns would not be used. Therefore, the study could have benefitted with more relationship and trust building with the research participants such as getting to know them more by visiting their communities and schools with them to ease some of the initial discomfort and would have allowed them to fully disclose more information and not limit their responses.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of rural African American students and the resources they received in preparation for college, I recommend an in-depth ethnographic approach to further describe and analyze the experiences of this special population. With this approach, I recommend spending more time with the research participants in their communities, speaking with parents, guidance counselors and teachers. Additionally, I recommend future research is needed in the following areas: 1) More research on the experiences of rural African American students both in high school and college 2) the intersectionality of race, rurality, class and college choice for rural African American students 3) the transitional process for rural African American students as they matriculate into college especially state flagship universities 4) Compare their preparedness and transition to other colleges such as community colleges, HBCs, and smaller college.

Also, future research should be conducted on dual enrollment programs. Most of the participants participated in dual enrollment programs offered by their school, most of the high schools ranked very low in terms of college and career readiness and the study participants described being behind during their first semester of college. Therefore, future research should explore the role and effectiveness of dual enrollment programs. Lastly, future research should explore the intersectionality of race and place by applying a different conceptual framework such as critical geography to further analyze inequalities within rural contexts.

Conclusion

I would stress the fact that it is possible. It is possible to come and have people here who are willing to help. I mean in Clover County we don't really don't know. People don't really tend reach out to us and let us know that. I would advise College administrators to know that we need these resources and try to implement some sort of program geared towards reaching out more and being a resource to these students because the reason I came here was because I felt like this would be the best place for me to succeed and I knew that it was possible.

[Alexander, Clover County High]

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the educational experiences of a commonly overlooked population of students, rural African American students. Working in Enrollment Management, I was keenly aware of how this group is often overlooked because of both the geographic location of the students and the historically academic profile of the students. While working in enrollment management, I wanted to change this pattern and with this study I wanted to know more about have these students reflect on the resources they received while in high school, which in turn impacted how they accessed and transitioned into higher education by giving them a voice.

Each of the participants felt overlooked and believed college administrators thought they did not want to pursue a college degree. As Tina explained, "I feel like they kind of underrate us like we don't want to pursue higher education when we actually do. We just don't have the resources or the people to take the time to actually push us." One of the many lessons learned from this project is colleges and universities need to do more to promote access to rural students. Each of the participants mentioned college and universities need to do more by visiting the schools, getting information to the students and simply letting them know "It's possible." The stories of these students provide great insight into some of the issues regarding schools in the Black Belt and information to assist policy makers and college administrators regarding the

college process so that rural African American students will no longer be considered as an overlooked population of students.

As previously mentioned in the literature, rural schools set the foundation for schooling in this country and still comprise a considerable portion of districts currently. Ironically, in the past couple of years there has been a growing interest in the rural student on college campuses. Upon the conclusion of this project, I noticed new initiatives designed to recruit and support rural students at various institutions particularly in the Southeast as well as College Advising Corps who travel to underserved areas such as rural schools to help expose rural students to higher education and help them navigate the enrollment process. I truly hope these programs have a sincere interest in benefitting rural students and not any underlying motives such as just another section to highlight in their diversity reports.

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Appendix A

Participant Interview Protocol

Participant Background Information

- 1) Hometown
- 2) High School Information
- 3) Gender
- 4) Family Educational Background/Occupation
- 5) Age
- 6) Academic Major
- 7) College Classification (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior or Senior)

High School Experience

- 1) Tell me a little about yourself.
- 2) Describe your experience living in a rural geographic region.
- 3) Describe your high school (location, resources offered, size, and racial make-up).
- 4) Tell me a story by reflecting on your high school experience.
- 5) Describe some of the resources that were available to you?
- 6) What kind of academic courses were offered at your high school (AP, IB, dual enrollment etc.)? If offered, did you take any of these college prep courses? Describe your experiences in these courses?
- 7) What kind of extracurricular activities, organizations or clubs were offered at your school?
- 8) Did you participate in any? If so, which ones? Describe your experiences.
- 9) Talk to me about your decision to pursue a college degree.
- 10) Describe how you came to learn about College testing and scores?
- 11) Describe how you come to take the ACT/SAT?
- 12) How did you prepare for the test (tutoring, prep course)? If you had tutoring or enrolled in a prep course, was it free?
- 13) Describe the college tours you took, if any? If so, how many? What schools did you visit and Why? If you did not take any college tours, why not?
- 14) Do you recall college recruiters visiting your high school? If so, which ones?
- 15) Talk me through your college application process? Decision Process?
- 16) How/Why did you pick your current college?
- 17) Did you receive any scholarships to attend your current institution?
- 18) How did you find out about any scholarships? Financial Aid?
- 19) Describe to me how well do you feel your high school prepared you for college?
- 20) Can you describe any barriers that may have prevented your access to college or certain programs?

- 21) If you could change anything about your high school experience what would it be?
- 22) Based on your experience, what information would you share with your high school principal or other administrators regarding the resources offered to rural African American students?

College Experience:

- 1) Tell me a story regarding your transition from attending a rural high school to college?
- 2) How did you navigate college coming from a rural environment?
- 3) What were some of your expectations regarding college?
- 4) Looking back, what are some things you wish someone would have told you about college?
- 5) How do you feel about your decision to attend your current institution?
- 6) Describe any financial obstacles you have faced attending college? How are you supporting yourself financially while you attend college?
- 7) Based on your experience, what information would you share with college administrators regarding African American rural student's access to higher education?

Family:

- 1) Talk to me about your family background.
- 2) How active were your parents in the college selection process?
- 3) How did your family/community help you prepare for college?

Appendix B

Education Report Card 2016-2017

School	Overall Score/Grade	Academic Achievement	Graduation Rate	College and Career Readiness	Chronic Absenteeism
Clover County	64/D	16.8	83	Black= 47 ED= 39	Black=19.09 ED= 21.69
Blanket County	74/C	32	88	66	22
Hill County	77/C	37	88.6	Black= 33 White=70 ED= 38	21.94
Pine County	71/C	14	85	56	29.89
Bend County	74/C	32.85	85	Black=32 White= 42 ED= 18	14.29
Ship County	61/D	8.94	81	33	16.74

Source: Alabama State Department of Education

**ED= Economically Disadvantaged*

**Academic Achievement=percentage of students proficient in reading and math*

**Chronic Absenteeism= percentage of students having 15 or more absences within a school year*

Appendix C

Alabama Department of Education Per Pupil Expenditures 2016

LEA	Local Sources PPE	Local Sources PPE Rank
Autauga County	664	23
Bullock County	961	18
Choctaw County	1,235	15
Clarke County	917	19
Dallas County	842	21
Greene County	2,130	7
Hale County	1,011	17
Lowndes County	1,342	12
Macon County	1,881	9
Marengo County	1,245	14
Perry County	664	22
Pickens County	1,143	16
Shelby County	2,542	6
Sumter County	1,390	11
Wilcox County	879	20
Homewood City	4,614	2
Hoover City	4,053	3
Huntsville City	4,033	4
Jacksonville City	2,062	8
Linden City	1,556	10
Madison City	2,622	5
Mountain Brook City	7,001	1
Selma City	1,335	13

*This list includes most of the Black Belt Counties and City School Districts to compare the per pupil expenditures of rural schools to non-rural schools in more affluent areas of the state.

Appendix D

Consent Forms

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study titled The Underrepresented Minority: African America Rural Students and Their Access to Higher Education

Participants: Please keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Primary Investigator

Schemavia Hall
College of Education
Department of Educational Leadership
Policy and Technology Studies
The University of Alabama
Box 870132
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0302
Phone: 205-391-4601 Email:
Schernavia.m.hall@ua.edu

Secondary Investigator

Dr. Nirmala Erevelles
College of Education
Department of Educational Leadership
Policy and Technology Studies
The University of Alabama
Box 870302
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
Phone: 205-348-1179
Email: nerevell@ua.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study.

Please read this document and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate in this study.

This study is being conducted by a doctoral student in the Social and Cultural Foundation program at the University of Alabama. This study is part of a dissertation research project and will be overseen by the secondary investigator.

What is the study about?

Research indicates that most studies do not consider the issues and challenges associated with rural schools, rural education nor the students attending these schools because most studies tend to focus on improving urban schools and urban education. Additionally, African American rural students and their voices are often lacking from research. Freeman (1997) argues African American student's opinions and perceptions are often excluded from research related to educational policies and issues. Current research tends to center on the reasons African American students aspire to attend higher education or ways to attract and retain, but few have considered

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the experiences and heritage of these students. The focus of this study is to use the narratives of African American students from the Black Belt region of rural Alabama in order to learn more about the challenges and issues rural students face in regards to the resources they receive and how these resources can impact their access to higher education.

Why is this study important—What good will the results do?

The findings of this study will provide educators and academic professionals with a rich, contextual understanding of the experiences of rural African American students who attended high school within the Black Belt and the issues and/or challenge they may face accessing higher education.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You either volunteered to participate in this study by contacting the researcher or you were identified and contacted by the researcher based on referrals. Additionally, you self-identify as an African American student who graduated from a high school within the Black Belt, a degree seeking undergraduate who is at least 18 years of age or older.

How many other people will be in this study?

The investigator hopes to interview at least 6-8 participants for this study.

What will I be asked to do in this study and how long will it take?

If you choose to participate in the study, Schemavia Hall will conduct a preliminary interview (45-60 minutes) at a place of your own choosing. In this preliminary interview we will explore your experiences attending a rural high school in the Black Belt and accessing higher education. Additionally, you will be given a little more background information about the project and will have the chance to ask any questions you may have about the research project. There will be a secondary interview to clarify responses from your previous interview. This interview should last no longer than one hour.

Additionally, all interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed in full. All interview materials (audio recordings and interview notes) will be kept in a secure location at the residence of the primary researcher.

Once study participants complete the phases of the research project as previously explained, the primary researcher will transcribe all interviews into text. Should the researcher need clarification on statements made by study participants, it may be necessary for the researcher to re-contact you for clarification purposes. Your permission is necessary before the primary researcher can contact you. Please indicate below whether or not you give the researcher permission to re-contact you.

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Will being in this study cost me anything?

The only cost to you is your time.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?

What are the risks (problems or dangers) of being in this study?

The study may have the following risk: There is minimal to no risk if you are involved in this study.

If you had a difficult experience that comes out during the phases listed above, you may experience heightened anxiety, stress or sadness when sharing the experience during the individual interview. If this occurs, you will be given time to collect yourself before continuing if you desire to do so.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

The study may have the following benefit: While there are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, you may find it encouraging that the research may provide current educators and researchers with useful information that can be used to help them better understand the experiences of African American rural students. Your participation in this study provides you with the opportunity to share your experiences in a way that can lead to policy changes that will include the voices of rural African American students. Additionally, your participation can raise awareness on how both policy makers, administrators as well as college and universities can better serve this population of students.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

For research related purposes, the interviewer would like to record basic biographical information including your race, gender, age, academic major/minor information. The transcripts of your interviews will have any identifiable information removed. All of your data will be assigned a number and kept together in order to separate it from the data collected from the other participants. Additional measures of confidentiality will include reasonable steps to ensure that the only persons with access to research records is the primary investigator, Institutional Review Board (IRB) professionals and other persons or agencies required by law. Such steps include using pseudonyms chosen by each participant in place of participant names and storing all research material in a secure location at the residence of the primary researcher. Audio-taped interviews will also be destroyed once they are transcribed. Also, please note that while information gathered during this study may be published, your identity will be kept strictly confidential. The researcher may want to quote your direct words either in the final report or in any future publications as a result of this study. Please indicate on the Permission to Quote form

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How you would like for the researcher to state your words directly either anonymously or by using a pseudonym?

What are the alternatives to being in this study?

The only alternative is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant?

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. It is your free choice. You may choose not to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Not participating or stopping participation will have no effect on your relationships with the researcher or the University of Alabama.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board is a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies. They may review the study records if they wish. This is to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as plan.

Who can I call if I have questions or problems?

The researchers conducting this study are: Schemavia Hall, a doctoral student in Social and Cultural Foundations at the University of Alabama, and Dr. Nirmala Erevelles, a professor in the Educational Leadership, Policy and Technology Studies department at the University of Alabama.

If you have questions about this study, you may contact the primary researcher at

Schernavia.m.hall@ua.edu. You may also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Nirmala Erevelles at nerevell@ua.edu.

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

You may also questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or by contacting Tanta Myles, Director, Office of Research Compliance, University of Alabama at cmyles(@)fa.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online or you may ask Schemavia Hall for a copy of the survey. You may also e-mail the IRB Outreach Office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

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Permission to Quote

Permission to Quote:

I may wish to quote your words directly in reports and publications resulting from this. With regards to being quoted, please check yes or no for each of the following statements:

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	I wish to review the notes / recordings collected during my interview.
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published (I will remain anonymous).
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	I agree to be quoted directly if a made-up name (pseudonym) is used.

Permission to Re-Contact Study Participants

Once study participants complete their interviews, the primary researcher will transcribe all interviews into text. Should the researcher need clarification on statements made by study participants, it may be necessary for the researcher to re-contact you for clarification purposes. Your permission is necessary before the primary researcher can contact you. Please indicate below whether or not you give the researcher permission to re-contact you.

Yes, I give permission to the researcher to contact me should she needs me to clarify any statements made during my interview.

No, I do not give permission to the researcher to contact me again after I have completed my interview.

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April 4, 2018

Schernavia Hall
Department of ELPTS
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 17-OR-183-R1 "The Underrepresented Minority: An Analysis of African American Rural Students and Their Access to Higher Education"

Dear Ms. Hall:

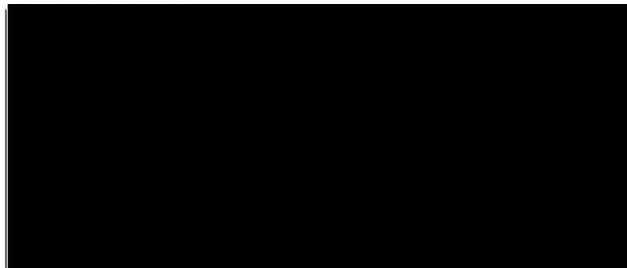
The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your renewal application. Your renewal application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on April 3, 2019. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Study Closure Form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.



Statement of Consent:

Please check the statements below to indicate your consent to participate in this study:

I have carefully read the information provided above, have asked questions and received answers and agree to participate in the study.

I understand that I must be at least 18 years old in order to participate in this study.

Yes, I give permission to the researcher to contact me should she need me to clarify any statements made during the outlined phases of the pilot study.

I have received a copy of this document to save for my records.

Signature of Participant

Signature of Primary Researcher

Audio Recording Consent Form

As previously mentioned, the individual qualitative interview will be audio recorded for research purposes. These tapes will be stored in a secure location and will only be available to Scherravia Hall (the primary investigator). The tapes and their transcriptions will be kept until the study has been concluded.

I understand that part of my participation in this research study will be audio-taped and I give my permission to the research team to record the interviews I participate in.

Yes, my participation in the individual interviews can be audio recorded.

No, I do not want my participation in this interview to be audio recorded.

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