



From this class, I have learned about many different types of privilege and oppression that exist in our society. There are examples from our readings such as low achievement of Latino and African American students, gang violence of the Bloods and Crips in Los Angeles, as well as opportunity being racialized. There were many different reasons and explanations given for the oppression that goes on, however one component that was often present was the setting of the story, urban areas. Because of this common component, I decided to conduct my research in a different area, one that I am more familiar with, the suburbs. I went to a high school in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. As a former student, it is an area and community that I am very familiar with.

To conduct my research, I went back to my former school and had discussions with current teachers at the high school. As a math teacher myself, I wanted to learn about and study the trend of African American and Latino students who were in the low level math classes. We read and had many discussions about how this group of students was often marginalized in urban school districts, but would the trend continue in the suburbs, and if so, what would that marginalization look like. I chose to examine numerous various Algebra classes, some that were above grade level, and some there were below. I looked at the percentage of Black and Latino students in those classes and compared them to the percentage of those same students in the entire school. Ideally, there would be a similar percentage in the low-level math classes as there are in the entire school.

Unfortunately, this was not the case. The total percentage of black and Latino students at the school is 13%. In an oppression free school we would look for similar numbers, but of the Algebra I and II classes that I looked at, I found that not to be the case. Here are the percentages for Asian, Black, Latino and White students for Algebra classes at the high school. The below

grade level classes are high lighted in green and the advanced or honors classes are high lighted in yellow. At this school, Algebra I and II are actually the name of the low tracked class, the grade level class is called Algebra with Trig, but I chose not to include those numbers.

General Student Breakdown (# reflect September enrollment)

	Asian	Black or African American	Hispanic or Latino	White
School estimate	12%	11%	2%	74%
Math				
Pre-Algebra (77)	5%	27%	1%	66%
Algebra I (631)	7%	17%	4%	72%
Algebra I Advanced (388)	9%	5%	3%	84%
Algebra I Support (59)	3%	27%	5%	64%
Algebra II (547)	6%	20%	2%	72%
Algebra II Honors (281)	31%	2%	2%	65%

Since the Latinos and Blacks make up about 13% of the school, we would hope for a similar percentage in not only the low tracked classes, but also the advanced classes. Clearly, that is not the case here. In the Algebra I support class, there is double the percentage of Latino and Black students that we would want to see compared to the Honor Algebra II class where there is less than a third of those students that should be there proportionally. The large numbers of Black and Latino students in the low level classes compared to the high level points to a large achievement gap based on races. So what is the reason behind these unfortunate findings? What is happening at this high school that allows this racial achievement gap to persist?

As it turns out, while I was doing my research, school administrators were busy asking the same question. They wanted to know why there is such a large percentage of Black and Latino students achieving below grade level in math and exactly what they could do about it. There was a meeting set up to present this data to the math department of the high school. Of all the teachers that attended the meeting, there was only one minority teacher, the rest were white. These teachers were defensive when they were presented with the data with responses such as, “a lack of parental involvement,” “a lack of preparation,” and “students were lazy.” In this paper I will examine some of these possible reasons as well as various oppressive cultural norms that could also answer the administration’s questions.

### Analysis

A complaint of the teachers at this meeting as well as a common excuse for low achievement that many teachers use is a lack of parental involvement. Many teachers believe that parents need to be working with their children at home and that learning is not something that just occurs from 8am to 3pm Mondays through Fridays. In her book, *Home Advantage*, Annette Lareau discusses the differences in parental involvement and gives a reason why some parents are more involved than other parents. She argues that the difference between involved parents and uninvolved parents is often a socio-economic one. Many low-income families have blue-collar jobs, which do not require them to work at home, meaning that they work from 9-5 and then don’t have to think about work until the next day. Conversely, many high-income families have one or two parents with jobs that do require them to work past 5pm. Whether it is traveling for work, meeting with co-workers or business partners in the evening, or preparing an important project for the future, these workers are required to take work home (Lareau, 2000). Lareau fails to address the idea that race could have an impact on parental involvement and

focuses on socio-economic status. If we are looking purely at socio-economic status, this high school is in a middle class suburb of Detroit. There are varying levels of prosperity, but people in this community would not be described as poor. Therefore, based on Lareau's argument that parental involvement is based on socio-economic status, she would argue that lack of involvement is not the cause of the achievement gap at this high school. As a former graduate of this school, I know that the community is involved with the school so I do not believe that parental involvement is a problem. However, if teachers believe that a lack of parental involvement is part of the problem here, why are these parents not participating to the degree that the teachers would like to see?

### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory is the idea that there is systemic racism in our society. It is not the individuals, but rather societal norms that contribute to privilege and oppression. Sofia Villenas and Donna Deyhle go in depth in this topic, arguing, "The lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) proves useful to understanding how the supremacy of "Whiteness" and the subordination of people of color is created and maintained in the United States" (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p. 414). These people of color are the marginalized students in my study. So how does Critical Race Theory explain the large number of marginalized students in the low level math classes? It could help explain the teachers' belief that the parents are not involved enough. Some Latin parents feel like they are disrespected by the teachers or administrators at school (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). The feeling of being disrespected is something that all cultures do not welcome. So if minorities are constantly feeling disrespected at the school, then why would they want to be at the school, participating or volunteering? The way that teachers and administration treat minorities is very important in improving their success and decreasing this racial gap. When

schools disregard Latin knowledge or culture, the Latin parents and students may feel like they will want to disregard white knowledge and culture.

When I discussed this idea of Critical Race Theory and disrespect of minorities with one of the math teachers, she had some very interesting insight to the situation.

“There was a survey that went out at the beginning of last year with questions about the school. The school wanted to know how parents felt about the school and administration. What they found was there were a lot of minority parents who responded that they felt disrespected by the school at times.”

This is exactly what Villenas and Deyhle described when they talked about Critical Race Theory and Latin students. If parents are feeling disrespected by the school, then it will be very difficult for their children to not become aware of this feeling of animosity. This can lead to holding a grudge against the school, or society in general. This grudge could cause the parents to be less likely to attend school events and give off the appearance that they are not involved, when in reality, they are just staying away because they have been disrespected. These feelings could also lead to a bad self image which could lead to self-destructive behaviors (Lipman, 2003).

White teachers continue to disrespect minority culture by simply saying that they want more parental involvement, but not doing the things necessary to get the parents more involved. It starts with simply showing more respect, but they could also make home visits (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahiticanichcha, 2001) or become bigger advocates for these marginalized students (Khalifa, 2012). In discussions with the teachers at this school, neither of these things are being

done, rather they are just perpetuating stereotypes which continue white dominance and racial oppression.

### Not Connecting with a Different Culture

As I stated before, when the administration had the meeting with math teachers about this racial achievement gap, there was only one minority teacher in attendance, an Asian-Indian. That means that there is not one black or Latino math teacher! Not one person who looks like these marginalized students is teaching them mathematics. Different cultures construct knowledge in different ways, or meaning is interpretation (Hall, 2001). With this in mind, white teachers may not be aware that some of the students who do not look like them could possibly construct knowledge in a different way than the teachers are used to. This could affect the way that the white teachers teach and this cultural gap could lead to negative educational outcomes for these marginalized students.

In her article, *Constructing an Image of a White Teacher*; Alice McIntyre discusses this very issue of white teachers working with minority students. She argues that black students in the urban setting were not being taught properly by the white teachers and those teachers did not have high enough standards of their marginalized students (McIntyre, 1997). Certainly one could argue that Alice McIntyre is only talking about urban schools. However, with the data that I gathered, I would counter that regardless of the setting of the school, Black and Latino students are still not being properly educated. The disproportionately high number of those students in the below grade level math class as well disproportionately low number of those students in the advanced class clearly shows that Blacks and Latinos are not being taught as well as the White students. I believe that a lack of understanding from White teachers of how minorities construct knowledge could be misinterpreted. This misinterpretation could be what leads to the low

standards that White teachers have of marginalized students, and low standards create negative educational outcomes.

It doesn't matter if a teacher is educating in rural Alaska or in the Pacific Islands, it is imperative to establish a connection and be aware of the student's cultural norms. It is important for teachers to adapt to student needs rather than force students to match the standards set by white society (Delpit, 2006). Despite the fact that these teachers may live in the same community as these students, they are still teaching across cultures and this achievement gap may point to the fact that they are unaware of these differences. It is not only necessary, but also imperative that teachers attempt to connect and appeal to students in a way that they can understand. Before this is even possible, teachers must learn about and accept cultures that are different from their own. Little can be done on an immediate basis to change the fact that there are very few minority teachers in the math department. However, it should be recognized that if future beginning teachers are not taught how to work with multicultural education, this racial achievement gap will persist. Teachers are simply taught about their subject matter, but they need to be taught about multicultural education as a whole (Asher, 2007). The lack of multicultural education as well as diversity amongst the educators is not something that many teachers want to recognize. This thought forces teachers to look in on themselves instead of focusing blame on others.

### Deficit Theory

It is this idea of blame that leads me to my final explanation for this racial achievement gap. When asked for possible reasons for the gap, some teachers responded with, "they are lazy" and "a lack of preparation." Deficit Theory presents the idea that it is the students themselves as well as their families and communities who are at fault for negative student outcomes as opposed

to the teachers and schools. With these responses from the teachers at the meeting, you can immediately see this theory at work. They are defensive and want to point the blame outward. When they bring these pre-conceived notions into the classroom, it will affect student outcomes. In other words, if teachers think students will not achieve well, then it most likely will turn out that way. Joseph Flessa argues this very point in his article about urban principals. He contends, “Researchers on both the Right and Left argue with increasing frequency that this focus on failure is a potential self-fulfilling prophecy and, therefore, a part of the problem” (Flessa, 2009, p. 344). Although Flessa was discussing urban schools, I contend that this idea is no different in suburban schools with a majority White population. Students will rise to the level of expectations that are set by the teachers. There is so much focus on failure of these marginalized students that for some, the battle is lost before it even begins.

The high number of Blacks and Latinos in the below grade level Algebra class is a prime example of these low expectations. Students get placed in these classes based on teacher recommendations. The low expectations are not only evident in the low classes, but more importantly in the honors classes. The percentage of marginalized students in the honors is so disproportionate compared to the percentage of these students in the whole school, that it screams low expectations. The percentage of Black and Latino Honors Algebra II students was a third of the expected proportion! That is simply far too low. If we look back at the White students, the percentages in both the advanced and low classes are much closer to the percentage of White students in the school. These students of color are simply not being pushed into the honors classes because of the low expectations set by teachers. This is a prime example of how Deficit Theory does not only exist in the urban schools, but can also be seen in middle class schools.

The fact that many teachers also sighted “lack of parental involvement” is also an example of Deficit Theory. It is one more example of pointing blame elsewhere. Some teachers feel the parents and outside community have too much power over these students so their negative educational outcomes are predictable (Flessa, 2009). When Flessa talked about marginalized students rate of failure, many principals responded with this idea, “They explained school failure as an inevitable outgrowth of community failure-in effect, blaming parents and students” (Flessa, 2009, p. 336). When this blame is placed, teachers often have set in their mind that there is little that they can do to help such students because they have already been corrupted by outside influences. These marginalized students do not need to be blamed, they need to be educated and pushed.

There are many different ways that we can observe Deficit Theory. But the most important part of this theory is the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Flessa, 2009). When teachers believe that the students, parents or communities are to blame for lack of previous success, this will often lead to future failures. The teachers’ responses to the data on the racial achievement gap at the meeting prove that some are indeed operating under this belief. These teachers are unwilling to accept the responsibility to educate *all* students, claiming that it is not their fault or problem. This Deficit Theory, or self-fulfilling prophecy just continues to perpetuate the racial achievement gap in mathematics. They set a low standard for these marginalized students and that is the standard that they reach.

### Recommendations

The reason behind this racial achievement gap is not important. What is important is the fact that it does exist and if it is not addressed, it will widen. As I said before, when first confronted with this data, many teachers were immediately defensive. It is incredibly important

to be able to have these conversations comfortably and to be able to use words like “racism” and “privilege.” Once we can begin having these conversations and more people can become aware of the privilege that exists in our society, we can begin to make a difference (Johnson, privilege). Certainly, having these conversations is step one for the teachers at this high school to lessen this achievement gap. However, I still do not believe that is enough. As Lisa Delpit describes, there is often a cultural gap between white teachers and marginalized students (Delpit). This is not specific to the high school that I studied, but an issue all over the country. Garcia and Gonzalez of the *Teachers College Record* forecast that by 2026, the percentage of ethnic minority students in America’s public schools will reach 70% (Parker, 2003). In contrast to this demographic trend among students, according to the Southern Education Foundation, only 13% of teachers were from minority groups, with this percentage forecasted to remain steady or possibly even decline in coming years (Landsman, 2001). While ethnic minority students are on the rise, those same minority teachers are remaining constant or declining. This points to an urgent need for our schools to have professional development on multicultural education. Incoming teachers need to be taught specifically how to teach minority students, not just the ones that look like them. If teacher education programs continue to only focus on how to teach a majority of the students, and not all of them, then this racial achievement gap will continue to widen. It should not be our goal as educators to educate some, but rather all. We should have the same high expectations of ourselves as we are told we should have of our students. Through such professional development, teachers can begin to realize how students are marginalized and how it can be prevented. This will go a long way in reducing the gap and creating positive educational outcomes for everyone, which in the end should be the goal for all teachers.

In the last four months, I have read about ideas, had discussions and written about ideas that have never even occurred to me before. Before taking this class, I would have looked at this data and immediately pointed the blame outward and believed some things similar to what the high school teachers at the meeting believed. It is the student's fault, or the parent's fault. However, now I am able to look at a situation that is familiar to me, and see it in a whole new light than I would have when I went to school there. There is a societal oppression of minorities and that oppression does have its affect on education of those minorities. Based on my findings, this oppression is not just isolated in the urban settings; it is alive and real in middle class America as well. I will admit that I am slightly proud of myself for being able to recognize this privilege and oppression for the first time in my life, but I also realize that there is still work to be done. It is not enough to simply pat myself on the back and be aware that it is going on. As a math teacher, it is my to educate *all* students. In my classroom, I will be aware of how Critical Race Theory can perpetuate White dominance and how sometimes minorities feel disrespected by this. I will know what Deficit Theory is and also work to obliterate it. Finally, I will have discussions with students so that I am able to connect to their culture leading to higher educational outcomes. Being more aware of these societal issues will not only make me a better teacher, but also a better person, leading to more positive educational outcomes for me and my students.

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