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From Elementary School to Doctoral Education: An Autoethnographic Journey

Gwendolyn D. Dailey

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From Elementary School to Doctoral Education: An Autoethnographic Journey

By

Gwendolyn Dailey

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From Elementary School to Doctoral Education: An Autoethnographic Journey

By

Gwendolyn Dailey

APPROVED BY:

Dissertation Chair: Charlane Starks, Ed.D.

Dissertation Co-Chair: Jennifer Geiger, Ed.D

Committee Member: Alison Alkon, Ph.D.

Committee Member: Rhonda Bryant, Ed.D

Committee Member: De'Shawn Wooldridge, Ed.D

Associate Dean, Laura Hallberg, Ed.D.

From Elementary School to Doctoral Education: An Autoethnographic Journey

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to God, my mother, Mrs. Etta Mae Ford, and my sister, Bettye J. "Sue" Paul. Although many people have supported me along this journey, the supernatural spirit of this dedication goes beyond life.

Dear Lord, I am grateful to be a chosen vessel for your purpose. I humbly submit myself as a testament to your love, grace, and faithfulness. Thank you for never leaving my side. You lifted and carried me when I didn't have the strength to move forward. There were times when I was on my face; I couldn't even kneel on my knees. With your loving hands, you held me until I could stand. I bow in submission and thank you.

Mama, how can I thank you for my life and all you have done for me? Thank you for your sacrifice in moving your family to Stockton, California, so that your children could have an opportunity for a quality education. I regret not valuing education and how you never saw me reach my academic goals and milestones. Your plea to return to school was my catalyst toward realigning with my mission and God's purpose. I LOVE you from my soul and beyond any words or time. You sacrificed your life for me and agreed to die so that I might live and move forward. I could never repay that type of love.

Sue, your love and encouragement led me to this moment. You taught me the power of education. From Dr. Maya Angelou to Nikki Giovanni, you told me to hold my head up and speak up and that I am a strong Black woman. Thank you for paving the way and lying down so I can stand on your back and be lifted from your shoulders. I am forever thankful that God appointed you to be my second momma. My heart still aches! Your death left a void. You left me too soon. I owe you more than I have. Until we rest beside each other. This one's for you!

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To my husband, Derrick Dailey, thank you for your support through many sleepless nights. I love and appreciate your allowing me the time to continue to focus on my studies. I am grateful for you. I'll always love you. To my daughter, Jennifer Primous, I clung to your courage and love throughout this journey. Thank you for all your help and support and for helping me cross the finish line. To my grandson, Isaiah, your existence fueled my motivation. Your image stayed with me as I studied. I stand against societal constraints in hopes of providing you with opportunities to live your potential and expose you to the power of hope. I aim for my life to stand as a testament that all things are possible! You are my life's rhythm. Mr. Ralph White, Sr., Thank you for introducing me to social changes before I knew myself. I appreciate the first time you exposed me to the power of my voice and for being proud to reclaim my heritage and culture! You are very instrumental in my life and mission. Thank you.

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From Elementary School to Doctoral Education: An Autoethnographic Journey

Abstract

By Gwendolyn Dailey

University of the Pacific
2024

Every child has a right to education, and their skin color should not determine their education quality. However, since the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), it has been proven that race continues to matter in the success and failure of education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The persistent achievement gaps between students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as the disparities in access to high-quality educational opportunities, demonstrate how race and ethnicity shape the educational experiences of students of color (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2012).

Unfortunately, stories such as Ruby Bridges of New Orleans, the Little Rock 9, and my personal experiences indicate the systemic structure inhibits education for Black students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This unequal system creates barriers that prevent Black students from learning at the same pace as their ethnic counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2006). By critically examining the educational trajectory of the researcher, this autoethnographic dissertation study sought to illuminate how race and ethnicity shape the educational experiences of students of color and offer insights that can inform efforts to promote equity and inclusion in educational settings.

Keywords: The Color of Education, Autoethnography, Systemic Racism, Critical Race Theory, Education, Black Students, Educational Equity, Financial Barriers, Social Prejudice.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Throughout this dissertation journey, I encountered many challenges. My advisors instructed me to retrieve my school records and return to the beginning of my academic journey, which made me anxious to read the records and review my grades. I focused merely on my high school experience, trying to forget my first educational steps. Within days, I obtained my records and felt nervous, and my hands began to shake as I opened a five-page, blurred-inked document. It listed my first educational steps at four years old, 1967, starting with preschool.

I still distinctly recall those times, even the black and white picture from my fourth birthday. I wore a little paper hat, and there were four candles on a homemade cake that my Mama made. Mama also made my dress that day. I wore it with little bobby socks and second-hand, scuffed-up shoes circled by my preschool classmates and my older brother, Caxton. My brother, who is two years older, was a student in my class throughout the fourth grade—a story within itself.

From first to sixth grade, I attended four elementary schools, each in disadvantaged communities with inadequate resources, substandard facilities, and deficient-unsympathetic teachers. We used ditto copies for our lessons instead of books. I clearly remember the Book Mobile visiting our school. The Book Mobile would visit at recess; you could buy a book for one dollar. Several kids would go into this big truck with a massive book and an owl on the outside at recess. I remembered how I felt when that truck would come, and the students would line up in front of the bus to purchase their books. I remained on the playground, feeling left out.

I did not have the dollar for a book. An alternative was the Weekly Reader; it was available for a dime, but even that tiny amount was a big ask for my family. With 13 siblings and

Mama being a single parent, on welfare, and picking up "day work," requesting even a dime felt like a bother, especially after witnessing my daddy being forced out of our house by the welfare workers. A white man and woman came to our house, looked in my Mama's closet, and informed her that my daddy could no longer live in our house or we would lose our house and food stamps. When my daddy returned home, the welfare workers instructed my daddy to pack his belongings. I could not believe it. He walked out of the house that he had worked so hard to protect, provide for, and build our family. Although we lived in concentrated poverty in the low-income apartments in Southeast Stockton, that unit was our home. For several days after my daddy left, the welfare workers would sit, parked on the corner, watching to see if my daddy would return. The day my daddy left the house, I heard my Mama cry!

Years passed, and my daddy never returned home to live. Instead, he would come to pick us up and take us to his new house with his new "friend," Miss Ola. As a little girl, I noticed this lady was sleeping in my daddy's bed, and I could not understand why. She would cook breakfast for us on the weekend and comb my hair. The entire situation was so weird, and Mama never spoke about it. I became a "little lady" at school when I was nine. In the fifth grade, with yellow pants, my "friend" arrived. I sat in the office, and Ms. Ola would check me out of school and care for me until my mom got off from work. How could I dislike her then? She seemed slightly different with ginger ale, crackers, and a soft bed.

Later, I transferred to junior high school and tried to forget about that horrific experience. I knew junior high school would be better than elementary school, and our family seemed to be a bit more stable. Stability did not last; a pivotal moment happened. In two years, the school district informed all parents of eighth graders throughout the district that ninth-graders would no longer return to our existing school in the following school cycle. Instead, we would begin at the

local high school in the district. We were so confused! Our ninth-grade cohort became the pioneers of the merger of the exclusion of junior high to entering high school. As high school students, ninth graders were a new change in the educational system. High school was a new environment, and I feared attending this school with older students.

Nevertheless, my daddy was my strength, and my brother was so angry. He thought he would be rid of me. He looked forward to the bragging rights of being a high school student. After the shock of it all, we could not wait for Labor Day and the first day of school. My daddy came to visit to take us shopping for two school outfits. He bought our first day of school clothes that year. He even gave us lunch money for a week.

On our first day of school, the change was still new to all the parents. My brother had previously received his classes, and I had to visit the attendance office before class to register. I remember my daddy met my mama at the attendance office to sign the necessary enrollment documents. I remember thinking how proud I was to see my daddy attend school. If I participated, my daddy would only attend some school events during my enrollment. He would leave that to my Mama for any office meetings or paperwork, and even then, my sister Bettye would have spoken to all school officials before my Mama's arrival. My daddy was severely illiterate and was ashamed of his literacy level. But for me, he was a hero. He was this towering figure—somewhat of a giant! Standing six feet-five inches, weighing over 300 pounds, and wearing a size 16 shoe, when he picked me up, I thought I was going to see Jesus! While we were in the office, he was given paperwork, and he leaned down to ask me what line he had to sign his name. He could not read. He only knew how to write his name (no signature).

Nonetheless, I was so proud of my daddy. He knew I was scared; he took my hand, and with my mama and a student assistant, they walked us to our classes. Danniela's class was first;

we waved through the glass door at Clay. Mama was crying and wiping tears with her handkerchief as she hugged Clay and his lunch bag. Up next was my class. The teacher seemed so polite; he asked my mama and daddy to enter the room with me. Once in the room, I gave the teacher my student card, and he announced the class! Listen up! We have Gwendolyn Primous, who will join our class today. She is here with her grandparents. He turned to my PARENTS and asked them to introduce themselves;" Before my mama and daddy could speak, I said, "They're not my grandparents! This is my mama, and that's my daddy!" My daddy waved at the kids, and my Mama said, "Hi you?" My daddy gave me five dollars, and with tears in her eyes, my Mama hugged me and whispered to do my best. She gave me my lunch—a fried salami sandwich with mustard, an apple pie, a frozen, canned grape soda wrapped in tin foil, a bag of plain potato chips, and four cookies. I could not wait for lunchtime!

After my parents left, the teacher code switched. He announced that the entire class was composed of ninth graders and over half would drop out, and unfortunately, three-quarters later, I fulfilled that prophecy. Tragedy would push me into making that decision. My daddy became severely sick in my first year, and months later, he died. My daddy's death profoundly affected me, leading to my eventually dropping out of high school alongside my brother. This decision would change the course of my life. Even though we dropped out, our withdrawal went unnoticed by the school administrators, which is a testament to the systemic failures we faced.

My insufficient academic experiences and journey catalyzed my dissertation research. This study was a qualitative autoethnography study with a critical race theory lens (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), that allowed me to focus on my experiences, beliefs, and interpretations of the findings from a theoretical lens. Additionally, the research illuminated how the educational systems have created apparent barriers for students with lower socioeconomic

statuses to inhibit access to quality education. It also allows teachers, administrators, and policymakers to explore best practices to address the students' upward mobility in accessing their fundamental rights to a quality education.

In our great nation of the United States, the idea that everyone is entitled to a quality education can be seen as more illusional than actual! Historically, Black students have been inhibited from gaining primary access to education. In the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall argued separate education is not equitable to all students, especially Black students (Klarman, 2007). More than half a century after the 1954 "successful" trial, pursuing academic equality for Black students remains an ongoing challenge (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Higher education is widely acknowledged as a crucial pathway for minorities, including Blacks. It serves as a means to transition from experiences of rejection, deprivation, and isolation to attaining acceptance, achieving economic efficiency, and fostering inclusion. This belief highlights the importance of education in providing opportunities for minority communities to improve their economic and social standing (Corsino & Fuller, 2021). It may be the only means of achieving social and economic equality. A college degree is necessary for both professional and financial success (Corsino & Fuller, 2021). Black college grads have expressed feeling a part of the community and seeing the benefits of higher education as a means of self-improvement, healing, and fulfillment.

More recent data show how beneficial a college degree is for Black students. Historically, Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, have been essential since they enroll 10% of all Black and graduate almost 20% of them. Over their career, HBCU graduates may anticipate earning an extra $927,000, 56% more than they might have without their degrees (Bridges,

2018). This demonstrates the advantages of higher education for society participation, personal fulfillment, and economic gain.

For many Black students, the financial component of their education is also quite important. Compared to similar non-HBCU universities, the average cost of attendance at an HBCU is 28% lower (Bridges, 2018). In addition, compared to 29% of Black students at other universities, 40% of HBCU students said they felt financially secure throughout their college years. Recipients of UNCF scholarships have a 70% six-year graduation rate, which is far higher than the norm of 45.9% (Bridges, 2018). These figures show how transformational higher education can help Black college graduates feel more like they belong, become more economically successful, and develop personally (Hussain & Jones, 2021).

According to research at a public regional institution, Black students saw financial assistance availability, the absence of social networks, and ACT exam requirements as obstacles to post-secondary education (Bright & Pearson, 2021). Additional variables that contribute to the success discrepancies Black students experience in higher education include local program budget cutbacks, racist practices in society, and the psychological effects of belonging to this specific social group (Yates, 2023).

Additionally, developmental education (DE) approaches that serve as significant barriers and disproportionately impact Black students in higher education are often overlooked (Southern Education Foundation, 2017). Developmental education is a term used to describe courses or programs designed to help students not yet ready for college-level work improve their reading, writing, and math skills. However, these programs often hinder Black students from facing systemic obstacles in higher education. For example, DE courses may require additional time and resources, leading to increased financial burden and delay in degree completion.

Additionally, DE courses may not align with students' academic and career goals, leading to frustration and disengagement.

The Southern Education Foundation's (2017) report highlighted the need for institutions to address these disparities and provide more equitable access to higher education for Black students. In response to this call, my study aimed to address the disparities experienced by Black students and access to higher education (Southern Education Foundation, 2017). I recognize the importance of implementing alternative approaches like the co-requisite models to cater for additional support and bridge the gap in university-level courses. My research focused on understanding the specific barriers Black students experience with developmental education and how higher education institutions can proactively dismantle barriers to foster a more inclusive and equitable education system.

According to St. Amour (2020), societal inequities begin before birth. This is due to inadequate healthcare, concentrated poverty, food deserts, and deficiencies in early childhood education, which can lead to high-risk pregnancies. These barriers create early obstacles for marginalized students, hindering their upward mobility and academic efficacy, particularly for Black students seeking access to higher education institutions. In my experience, barriers in higher education are crucial because they can help institutions create more opportunities and equitable pathways for Black students. By understanding these barriers, institutions can develop policies, interventions, and programs that address these issues and help Black students succeed in higher education.

According to St. Amour (2020), despite existing disparities, higher education can create more opportunities and equitable pathways for Black students. Therefore, it is crucial to understand Black students' barriers before setting foot on campus because it can help student

recruitment and retention by creating a more inclusive environment that supports the success of all students. This narrative emphasizes the significance of "What Happens Before College that Matters" (St. Amour, 2020). Understanding Black students' barriers in higher education can help academic institutions scrutinize and tackle these concerns, ultimately leading to more equitable opportunities for this student population. By creating a more inclusive environment that supports the success of all students, institutions can improve student recruitment and retention rates and help Black students succeed in higher education.

Black students persevere in pursuing a higher education but encounter many obstacles. Benefits from higher education include better salaries, less unemployment, less reliance on public assistance, a more extensive tax base, and improved civic involvement (Odilovich et al., 2020). However, some obstacles prevent Black students from taking advantage of these opportunities. Therefore, two critical challenges facing Black students in higher education are racism and colorism. Racism is the term for a racialized system of advantage and disadvantage. It covers various phenomena, including institutional and systemic practices that uphold racial injustices, individual bias, and prejudice. Several areas of higher education, such as admissions practices, course content, faculty representation, and campus culture, may exhibit racism.

According to a report by McKinsey, historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations such as Black, Hispanic Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander are still underrepresented in higher education among undergraduates and faculty and in leadership (Ellsworth et al., 2018). The report also suggested only 8% of institutions have at least equitable student representation while helping students from underrepresented populations graduate at the same rate as the general US undergraduate population (Ellsworth et al., 2018).

The existing literature, including studies by Anderson (2020), Hammond (2021), and Williams et al. (2020), highlighted that racism is at the root of challenges faced by Black students in higher education. This study shows how systemic racism continues to impact access, retention, and graduation rates for Black students. As evidenced in this work, the research community has called for a more equitable and inclusive educational system that addresses the issue and provides equal opportunities for all students.

In addition to exploring racism, I explored academic preparedness, biased admissions recruiting and practices, and income inequality as connected outcomes of these disparities were designed to methodically identify and analyze the underlying factors contributing to the disparities affecting Black students in higher education. My research extended previous studies on this topic and will guide future research on effective pathways to prepare Black students for a college-bound experience and establish a plan to reshape educational policy to bring accountability to systemic racism, and systematically address systemic racism in higher education, contributing to efforts to reduce educational disparities.

Background

Examining the educational system to illuminate systemic structures that inhibit educational equity from P-16 for Black students was one factor for the decision to undertake this study on these factors in education in the United States, specifically California. This stems from the need to address the persistent racial disparities in educational attainment. Despite numerous efforts to promote equal access to education in the United States, Black students continue to face significant challenges, which include inadequate financial resources, limited access to quality educational institutions, and systemic racism, to mention a few (Gallup Inc, 2023). These challenges have a long and complex history in the United States. One of the most significant

events in the history of education for Black Americans was the 1954 Supreme Court decision,

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (National Archives and Records Administration, 2004,

p. 11). The *Brown* decision declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional and mandated

the desegregation of schools across the country. While this decision was a crucial step toward

equal educational opportunities for Black Americans, it did not eradicate the systemic racism and

inequalities within the educational system.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement fought for equal access to education,

among other things (Hinton, 2015). The Higher Education Act of 1965 was signed into law as

part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. It aimed to make higher education

accessible to low-income students, including Black Americans (Hinton, 2015). This act

established the Pell Grant program, which provides financial aid to students who need it to attend

college.

The complex effects of racism on Black students' experiences and mental health in higher

education have come to light more and more in recent studies. For instance, Anderson (2020)

described how Black students actively fight racism in addition to encountering it, a battle that

often causes lasting emotional wounds. Long-term exposure to racism has been linked to

increased anxiety and worse consequences for mental health.

Furthermore, Williams et al. (2020) drew attention to how often Black students

experience microaggressions, which are unapparent, indirect, and frequently unintended

manifestations of racism. The impact of these microaggressions on their general well-being and

mental health may be significant. Together, these papers show how widespread and harmful

racism is in the context of higher education.

Generally, the history of barriers that inhibit access to undergraduate post-secondary education among Black students is long and complex. Efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are just an illusion, and it seems like the DEI to the Black American means denied, excluded, and isolated. However, while some efforts have been made to address this issue, significant challenges that still need to be acknowledged include eradicating systemic racism and inequalities within the educational system.

Systemic racism describes the institutional and structural impediments that maintain racial inequality and prejudice in society (Banaji et al., 2021). Systemic racism in higher education may take many different forms, such as discriminatory admissions procedures, scarce funding, and a lack of services for Black students to get assistance. Policies that disadvantage Black students who may not have had the same chances might be considered biased admission practices. These policies may favor students from particular racial or socioeconomic backgrounds. As per Ellsworth and Harding (2022), historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations continue to be underrepresented in higher education. Only 8% of institutions support students from underrepresented populations to graduate at the same rate as the U.S. undergraduate population, and only 8% have at least equitable student representation (Ellsworth & Harding, 2022). Chronic disparities in educational outcomes, such as lower high school graduation rates for students from underrepresented populations compared to White and Asian students, indicate Black students may find it difficult to afford higher education due to limited financial resources (Ellsworth & Harding, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of support networks may compound Black students' feelings of isolation and lack of support on campus, which is made worse by the slow progress being made toward racial and ethnic justice in higher education (Ellsworth & Harding, 2022).

The focus of this inquiry was to delve into distinct challenges that impede Black students' equitable accessibility to P-16 education within California. While the existing research provides insight into prevalent obstacles, this inquiry remained receptive to identifying novel barriers that might not have been comprehensively addressed in previous studies. For instance, the study remained open to encompassing additional barriers that may be intertwined with factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, or other intersections. This flexibility in scope allows for a comprehensive assessment of Black students' multifaceted challenges, thereby enhancing our understanding's depth and accuracy. Researchers and scholars from various disciplines have contributed to that literature, shedding light on systemic barriers and disparities that hinder equitable access to higher education. For instance, Ciuffettelli Parker and Conversano (2021) highlighted the impact of poverty, DEI, and the call for a post-pandemic new normal on accessibility to educational resources and technology access, streaming, resilience, and teacher-student identity and relationship issues, with recommendations to eradicate systemic barriers in schools. Another article published in *Inside Higher Ed* stated accessing higher education remains challenging for Black students, particularly at four-year colleges (St. Amour, 2020). At some institutions, Black students' access to education has recently decreased. We can note that some of the critical areas researched include socioeconomic disparities, educational inequity, racial discrimination, college access programs, and campus climate and inclusivity, to mention a few.

Studies have shown financial obstacles impede Black students' ability to pursue post-secondary education. According to the Lumina Foundation (2021), Black students had a lower likelihood of securing grants and scholarships and a higher reliance on loans. A Brookings Institution (2022) investigation also revealed structural problems with the college financial assistance program exacerbating racial inequities in college affordability. A contributing factor in

this discrepancy is the government financial aid formula's exclusion of retirement funds and home equity from computations, which disproportionately benefits families with higher ownership of these assets—primarily white families (Levine & Ritter, 2022). According to the data, white students get an implicit subsidy on average of $2,200 more per year than Black students. This finding impacts the educational achievements of both groups, including college enrolment, graduation rates, and student debt levels (Brookings, 2022). Moreover, the median implicit subsidy for white students is $3,400 annually for households earning between $75,000 and $125,000, which is double the amount for Black students (Levine & Ritter, 2022). These differences highlight Black students' major obstacles while getting financial aid for their higher education.

There are several ways financial aid policies can contribute to inequalities. One aspect is the criteria used to determine eligibility for financial aid. Historically, some policies have been biased or disproportionately favor certain groups, which can disadvantage marginalized communities. For example, income thresholds or asset requirements may not adequately account for Black students and their families' unique financial circumstances (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2021).

Another aspect is the availability and distribution of scholarships and grants. These forms of aid can significantly reduce the financial burden of higher education. However, systemic barriers or implicit biases in the selection processes for scholarships and grants may hinder equitable access for Black students. Factors such as limited outreach efforts, lack of diversity in selection committees, or criteria that inadvertently disadvantage certain groups can contribute to disparities.

Additionally, the design of loan programs can also perpetuate inequalities. Black students being more likely to rely on loans to finance their education can lead to higher levels of student debt, which can have long-term financial consequences. The terms and conditions of loans, including interest rates and repayment options, can disproportionately impact marginalized communities, exacerbating disparities in wealth accumulation and economic well-being.

Furthermore, the admission process in higher education institutions may also act as a barrier to Black students. According to a study by the U.S. Department of Education (2016), Black students face challenges related to admission processes, such as biased admission policies and limited access to information about post-secondary education opportunities. Discriminatory admission policies refer to discriminating against certain groups of people based on their race, ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics. Limited access to information about post-secondary education opportunities refers to the lack of resources and support that Black students receive when applying for college or a university. This can include inadequate guidance counseling, lack of financial aid resources, and limited access to college fairs and other events that provide information about post-secondary education opportunities. Notably, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) study found Black students were less likely to have access to college preparatory resources, such as guidance counselors who encouraged and exposed them to college fairs and parents with degrees that can assist in navigating them through the academic system. These factors may affect their ability to make informed decisions about their educational futures. Consequently, my study argued Black students are subsequently affected by the "roots" of the systemic structure that nurture the discriminatory practices they endure.

Problem of Practice

This autoethnography research described systemic barriers that could inhibit other students' access to post-secondary education. Despite the efforts to address educational inequities, Black students face significant challenges in accessing quality education and having mobility in access to completing their higher education. They are not entering college at the same rate comparable to their ethnic peers. According to a report by the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), Black students made up 12.5% of all post-secondary enrollment in the Fall of 2020, while the overall enrollment of Black students has declined by 22% since fall of 2010 (Post-secondary National Policy Institute, 2019). In 2020, only 36% of the 18-24-year-old Black population were enrolled in college compared to 40% of the overall U.S. population (Post-secondary National Policy Institute, 2019). The report also highlighted Black students are more likely to attend public versus private higher education institutions. In Fall 2020, 67% of Black students attended public institutions: 42% attended public four-year institutions, and 28% attended public two-year institutions (Post-secondary National Policy Institute, 2019). These statistics indicate an urgent need to address the systemic barriers that inhibit Black students' access to undergraduate post-secondary education. Despite the efforts to address educational inequities, Black students face significant challenges in accessing and completing higher education. They are not entering college at the same rate comparable to their white peers.

Moreover, Black students often face academic unpreparedness, lack of effective policies, inadequate financial resources, biased admission practices, and recruitment. These challenges limit their access to higher education and perpetuate racial disparities in educational attainment. Therefore, there is a need to identify and address the barriers that inhibit access to undergraduate post-secondary education among Black students (Wint et al., 2021). This research problem is

significant as with it, I sought to address the racial disparities in the educational system and promote equitable access to post-secondary education for Black students. By examining the systemic barriers that inhibit access to higher education for Black students, this study sought to inform policy and practice to improve educational opportunities for this underserved population.

Furthermore, racial disparities in schooling continue to be a significant concern in the US. According to Elliott (2020), who cited World Economic Forum research, there have been notable persistent discrepancies in racial attainment throughout much of the United States, though these gaps have been gradual. Additionally, this research emphasized how COVID-19 may exacerbate educational disparities (World Economic Forum, as cited in Elliott, 2020). Furthermore, according to a Brookings Institution article by Darling-Hammond (1998), the majority of Black, Native American, and Latino students were taught in thoroughly segregated schools as late as the 1960s, received funding for those schools at significantly lower rates than those serving White students receive, and were frequently shut out of many higher education institutions. According to Bushnell (2021), inadequate financing or disregard for underprivileged or minority school districts is the country's primary source of educational disparity, often resulting in below-average performance and accomplishment.

In addition to these systemic issues, Black students face unique challenges when accessing undergraduate post-secondary education. A research article by Wint et al. (2021) highlighted accounts of educational opportunity gaps for Black boys are overwhelmingly focused on later years of development. Achievement and discipline disparities are evident across their lifespan. Life course and intersectionality theories were used to develop a framework for understanding obstacles Black boys face during their preschool through high school years. Outlining the cumulative impact of threats and protective factors on their academic success

provides insight into supporting Black boys at various developmental stages (Wint et al., 2021).

Institutional racism in post-secondary education can look like a curriculum focused primarily on

research from Western, educated, industrialized, prosperous, and democratic (WEIRD) societies

and a lack of support and resources offered to BIPOC students and faculty (Senay, 2020).

Therefore, exploring the systemic barriers that inhibit access to my P-16 education as a Black

student is crucial to promoting educational equity and social justice.

Gap in Literature

The current literature underscores a critical gap in our understanding of systemic barriers

that impede Black students' access to undergraduate post-secondary education, a critical factor in

promoting educational equity and social justice.

Purpose of the Inquiry

This autoethnographic study explored my P-16 educational experiences leading up to my

post-secondary doctoral studies program.

Inquiry Questions

1. What were some of the challenges I faced in my P-16 experiences?

2. As a Black woman, what were some issues I experienced in my post-secondary
   education?

3. In what ways did my family support my P-16 experience?

4. How did I overcome the challenges and barriers?

Significance of the Inquiry

This study was a critical examination of the systemic racism Black students encounter

from P-16 and how it continues to influence their path to higher education, drawing on my own

educational experiences. My study aimed to provide essential insights that add to the continuing

conversation on racial equality in education and guide the creation of more inclusive and equitable educational practices by exploring these persistent issues and their effects on academic achievement.

Furthermore, this study may allow policymakers and educators to develop effective policies and interventions to address Black students' barriers to post-secondary education. This can lead to a more equitable education system that provides equal opportunities for Black students, which will help close the educational attainment gap and contribute to a more just and equitable society.

This study provides insight into the root causes of the problem and how society can address systemic racism in education, defined as the institutional and structural practices that perpetuate racial inequalities and discrimination. By employing an historical lens, this research analyzed the chronological progression of systemic racism, tracing its deep-rooted impact on students' educational journey. The historical lens of analyzing the chronological progression of systemic racism, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Little Rock Nine, and Ruby Bridges, is crucial to understanding the current social construct. The past events are as avoidable as they are artificial, and we can fix these issues as a society. These barriers are the root of critical race theory (CRT) within the institution, are still present, and are woven into policies today, such as biased recruitment, substandard schools in low-income neighborhoods, socioeconomic status, and low equity. The study can empower Black students by raising awareness of their challenges and the systemic nature of the problem, allowing more students to overcome barriers that inhibit their access to education.

Notably, the findings can inform the development of programs and interventions supporting Black students accessing P-16. Such interventions include mentoring programs,

cultural awareness training and dialog, financial aid considerations, admission recruitment with Black staff, upgrading schools in lower-income neighborhoods, and providing academic support. Generally, this study focused on barriers that inhibit access to education among Black students significantly contributes to education, society, and Black students' lives. This study's findings can also inform teachers teaching P-16 students and those researching the P-16 experience, the creation of programs addressing Black students' barriers to accessing education, and the promotion significant equity in education.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) served as the guiding framework for shaping the design and implementation of this study. Adopting CRT established a roadmap to effectively scrutinize and uncover deeply ingrained racial inequalities that often remain obscured within institutional frameworks. The theory employs analytical tools to dissect the structural findings of these disparities. Historical injustices persist and manifest in policies, admissions, and education. In this study, I intended to uncover the implicit biases, power dynamics, and institutional practices perpetuating these inequities by employing CRT.

Before investigating the theoretical implications, it is crucial to understand the current demographics. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), Black students are likely to complete their degrees, with a graduation rate of 45% compared to 64% for white students. This gap in graduation rates has persisted for decades, often attributed to the structural barriers Black students face in the education system (Assari et al., 2021). The impact of these challenges is full potential. Therefore, it is essential to understand the factors that contribute to these challenges and identify strategies that can be employed to address them.

Chapter Summary

Chapter One of my study set the foundation for my exploration of systemic racism in education, utilizing a personal narrative to highlight the challenges I faced as a Black student while undergoing my P-16 education continuum. It began with my early educational experiences, marked by limited resources and racial biases, and positioned these experiences within the broader context of systemic racism and historical segregation in the American educational system. The chapter also underscored the significance of landmark legislation and court cases, like the Higher Education Act of 1965 and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), in shaping educational equity. Additionally, it outlined my intent to study Black students' academic and social experiences, focusing on issues like biased admissions, lack of support systems, and insufficient faculty and curriculum representation. This chapter set the stage for my research and advocates for significant changes in higher education practices and policies to create more inclusive institutions.

Key Terms

Admission Policies: The criteria and rules set by colleges and universities to determine which students are eligible for admission (Research Data Assistance Center, 2024). These policies may consider academic performance, standardized test scores, and extracurricular activities.

Admission Practices: The actual processes and methods educational institutions use to implement their admission policies (Oanda, 2020). These practices can sometimes exhibit bias or discrimination, particularly against specific groups such as Black students, often influenced by systemic racism.

Academic Preparedness: Refers to the knowledge and skills, including cognitive and non-cognitive abilities (for example, critical thinking, time management, and study skills), that students need to succeed in college-level coursework (Magnaye, 2020).

Bias: Prejudice or unfair preference for or against a person or group, often resulting from unconscious stereotypes (Murphy, 2021).

BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and people of color (YWCA, 2022).

Cognitive Skills: Intellectual abilities related to learning, thinking, and problem-solving (Millacci, 2022).

Critical Race Theory: A collection of Critical stances against the existing legal order from a race-based perspective (Greenberg & Sherman, 2021).

Critical thinking: is analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing information thoughtfully and logically (The Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2019).

Developmental Education: Developmental or remedial education courses are designed to develop the reading, writing, and math skills of students deemed underprepared for college-level courses—usually through standardized tests (Ganga et al., 2018).

Discrimination: Unjust treatment of individuals or groups based on their perceived differences, such as race or ethnicity (Jed Foundation, 2023).

Education Disparities: Refers to the unequal distribution of educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes among different racial or ethnic groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Extracurricular Activities: Non-academic activities or pursuits that students engage in outside their regular coursework may be considered in college admission decisions (Christison, 2013).

Institutional Racism: A form of systemic racism wherein discriminatory practices is embedded within the policies, procedures, and culture of institutions, perpetuating racial inequalities (University of Southern California, 2021).

Non-Cognitive Skills: Personal qualities and characteristics that contribute to a student's success, such as motivation, perseverance, and interpersonal skills (Indeed, 2022).

Opportunity Disparities: Unequal access to opportunities, resources, and advantages often associated with systemic racism (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Post-Secondary Education: Education that occurs after high school, typically referring to colleges, universities, and vocational schools (Ganga et al., 2018).

Social Structures: The enduring patterns of relationships, roles, and societal institutions that shape individual behavior and opportunities (Staines et al., 2023).

Standardized Test Scores: Scores achieved on standardized assessments are often used as admission criteria for colleges and universities (Christison, 2013).

Study Skills: Techniques and strategies students use to enhance their learning and comprehension of academic material (Indeed, 2022).

Systemic Racism: The presence of racism is deeply ingrained in social structures and institutions, resulting in unequal outcomes for people of color, who often face barriers in accessing opportunities and resources compared to white individuals (Greenberg & Sherman, 2021).

Time Management: Efficiently organize and allocate time to tasks and activities (Indeed, 2022).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

"Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2018). With these profound words from Nelson Mandela, we are reminded of the transformative power of education, notably higher education, in shaping the lives of individuals and societies. However, the path to higher education is not always equitable, especially for Black students who face systemic barriers that hinder their access and success because of race and racism. In Chapter Two, I reviewed the literature on critical race theory (CRT) to understand the complexities of the issues at hand and to guide my analysis and interpretation of the persistent disparities in educational opportunities. Critical race theory helped me examine how historical injustices continue to impact access to quality education and provides a framework for addressing these disparities and fostering a more inclusive and just educational system. By exploring these theoretical perspectives, I aimed to shed light on the underlying dynamics and mechanisms perpetuating racial inequalities in policy, admissions, academics, and funding. My research focused on California, as CRT has been a topic of debate in recent years and was accessible. The California Department of Education (CDE) voted to adopt an ethnic studies curriculum founded on CRT despite objections from more than 100,000 people (Ohanian, 2021).

On the other hand, California has also become the first state to require ethnic studies for high school graduation (Ohanian, 2021). Throughout this chapter, I define key terms used in this research and demonstrate their significance within the context of my study. This helps ensure clarity and a shared understanding of the concepts employed in subsequent chapters. I utilized

CRT to review the literature for my study. The framework is also helpful for how I approached my research questions and methodology.

Additionally, this chapter explores crucial areas such as financial barriers, which include the economic challenges that disproportionately affect Black students' access to education. Social prejudice and race is explored to understand how societal biases and racial discrimination further compound these educational challenges. Furthermore, the impact of race on education outcomes was analyzed to comprehend how racial identity affects academic achievements and opportunities. The reviewed literature underscores the complex, intersecting factors that contribute to the educational disparities experienced by Black students.

Critical Race Theory

This study applied the critical race theory to examine and better understand the barriers researchers experienced while implementing the key initiatives identified. Critical race theory was founded on the scholarship of Alan Freeman and Derick Bell. It is focused on racialized experience and racism in evaluating systemic power in the cultural, social, and political constructs (Lawrence & Hylton, 2022). From a wider angle, CRT claims there is the existence of white supremacy and racism and they are normalized and ordinary. Moreover, CRT contends race's socio-political power dynamics interact with other identities' power dynamics and the laws reinforce these socio-political power dynamics of race (Walton, 2019). Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that examines the intersection of race, law, and power.

There are several general propositions regarding race and racism many critical race theorists would accept despite the considerable variation of belief among movement members. These propositions constitute a set of "basic tenets" of CRT (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). The primary tenets of CRT are:

1. Racism is ordinary, not aberrational: Racism is not an isolated or exceptional event but rather a normalized aspect of a society deeply ingrained in American culture's fabric (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

2. Society is constructed around white privilege: White privilege refers to the advantages white people enjoy due to their skin color. Critical race theory argues these privileges are often invisible to those who benefit from them (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

3. The voice of color thesis highlights the importance of lived experiences: This thesis emphasizes the importance of personal experiences in shaping one's understanding of race and racism. It suggests people of color have unique insights into racism because they have experienced it firsthand (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

4. Interest convergence suggests racial progress is only made when it converges with the interests of the dominant group. This tenet argues racial progress is only possible when it aligns with the interests of those in power (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

5. Intersectionality highlights how race intersects with other forms of oppression: Intersectionality refers to how different forms of oppression (such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, among others) intersect and interact with one another (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

6. Storytelling and counter-storytelling are essential tools for understanding and challenging dominant narratives. This tenet emphasizes storytelling's importance in challenging dominant narratives about race and racism. It suggests that by

sharing their stories, people can challenge stereotypes and promote greater understanding between different groups (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022).

Consequently, Shelton's (2018) work to define and document CRT scholarship identified the primary tenets of critical race theory as critiques of racism are ordinary, not aberrational; society is constructed around white privilege; the voice of color thesis highlights the importance of lived experiences; interest convergence suggests that racial progress is only made when it converges with the interests of the dominant group; intersectionality highlights how race intersects with other forms of oppression; and storytelling and counter-storytelling are essential tools for understanding and challenging dominant narratives. Shelton (2018) argued CRT is useful for examining the relationship between race, racism, and power. It is particularly relevant in the current political climate, where marginalized groups face significant challenges. In the context of this research, CRT can be a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how race and racism impact access to higher education. This study highlights several fundamental CRT tenets relevant to this project, including the idea that racism is normal and ordinary, and that race is a product of social thought (Shelton, 2018).

More specifically, CRT can help us understand how race and racism impact access to higher education by highlighting several fundamental tenets. One of these tenets is that racism is typical, meaning it is not an aberration but a fundamental aspect of society. Another key tenet is that race is a product of social thought, meaning it is not a biological fact but a social construct (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). By understanding these tenets, we can better understand how race and racism operate in society and how they impact access to higher education.

Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate first implemented CRT in educational settings (Ledesma et al., 2023). Their work brought attention to how racism operates within educational institutions. Their research shows how race and racism disproportionately harm Black and other racialized individuals (Ledesma et al., 2023). Following this work, Dumas and Ross (2016) further conceptualized Black CRT (BlackCrit), which specifies that anti-Blackness is normalized and vital to society and that Blackness is contrary to neoliberal multiculturalism. BlackCrit was developed by Dumas and Ross (2016). Dumas and Ross (2016) showed using BlackCrit and examining desegregation and punishment in schools, anti-Blackness leads to marginalization, disdain, and distancing of Black bodies inside the educational system.

Research on STEM education has also used CRT themes to examine how racism is present in STEM teaching methods and to advocate for the acknowledgment of whiteness in science education and its reduction (Lee et al., 2020). In particular, BlackCrit has been utilized to articulate how STEM can be reframed as an anti-Black construct and that more scholars of STEM education need to consider not only equity in a general sense but also specifically begin to address STEM's role in maintaining and promoting anti-Blackness in society (Cedillo, 2018). As a result, critical race theory offers a framework for scholarly analysis and reflection regarding how an institutionalized perspective of race (particularly Blackness) might affect one's behavior and its effect within their operational environment.

More research has been conducted in the United States to understand better how racism shows itself in post-secondary education (Senay, 2020). Although CRT is not always used, some research literature highlights the inequalities in post-secondary education for students of color, Indigenous, and students of other racialization (Senay, 2020). However, within the context of the U.S., there is a scarcity of literature that offers critical reflections on the intersection of post-

secondary STEM education, institutional operations, race-based considerations, and the inclusion of Black people.

This study used a CRT framework to conduct a reflective analysis of the barriers Black students face, practices, and efforts put into place to center Blackness and confront anti-black racism. The study "STEM Pathways for Black and Latinx Middle and High School Students" (Park-Taylor et al., 2022) explored Black and Latinx youths' situated experiences with and perspectives on STEM education. The study interviewed 24 middle and high school students about their perceptions of their math and science preparation, their pursuit of STEM pathways, and their persistence in these fields. The results suggested a significant theme related to participants' experiences navigating uneven pathways toward academic and STEM success. Concerning this significant theme, five open themes emerged, which included characteristics, behaviors, and beliefs related to success in math and science;

   i Familial role in achievement and success;

   ii The lived experience of school and STEM classes;

   iii External barriers and supports related to academic success; and

   iv STEM careers and the world of work (Park-Taylor et al., 2002).

The study also highlighted the challenges Black and Latinx youth face in their math and science education, which may inform the development of STEM education programs that meet the needs of this population (Park-Taylor et al., 2022).

The journey towards equitable access to post-secondary education for Black students involves a complex interplay of various factors. To comprehensively address this issue, it is essential to delve into the literature that sheds light on these challenges. Literature reveals Black students often face formidable obstacles to higher education (Sablich, 2016). One significant

hurdle is the presence of financial barriers, which can encompass tuition costs, textbooks, and other related expenses (Perry & Barr, 2021).

Financial Barrier

Black students face financial barriers to accessing higher education, such as high tuition costs, low family costs, low family income, limited financial aid, and high student debt. These barriers are reinforced by the racial wealth gap, which means Black families have less wealth and assets than white families and cannot support their children's education. According to Kwakye and Deane (2022), equitable and affordable access to post-secondary education is fundamental to the success of American democracy. However, financial barriers are one of the significant factors towards achieving post-secondary education. Research by Lovenheim (2017), a research associate in the NBER Economics of Education and Public Economics Programs, noted many obstacles prevent low-income students from succeeding in higher education, such as financial hardship, lack of knowledge about college options and quality, and lower academic preparedness. Some policies have tried to address these multiple challenges with comprehensive programs. For example, the Lone Star (LOS) in Texas, the STBF scholarship in Nebraska, and the ASAP program in New York City.

Previous research has found it challenging to obtain credible data estimates of the causal effect of family financial resource variation to attain post-secondary education. Getting such estimates is challenging as wealth and income are not randomly assigned among students. Families with little wealth at the time of their children's admission to college had fewer resources throughout their lives to invest in their education (Lovenheim, 2017). Consequently, students from lower financial backgrounds tend to be less academically prepared for college than their counterparts from rich white backgrounds.

According to the College Board (2019), increases in tuition and fees are already surpassing inflation, bringing the average annual tuition at private universities to almost $16,000. The average cost of attendance at public colleges is $4,500. The sum is increased even more by room and board (College Board, 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), 88% of Black students need financial help. According to college statistics, fewer students are enrolled in post-secondary education. In most instances, it is because of financial constraints or the urge to earn a living immediately. Notably, the National Clearinghouse Research Center revealed, on average, college enrollment in the United States is continuously decreasing (Nietzel, 2021). Statistically, in 2021, the number of enrolled students alone decreased by 600,000 students when compared to 2020.

Consequently, this is evident in the recent college dropout rate and is even worse when considering college demographics by race (Bouchrika, 2022). This also implies many Black students will not finish their degrees due to financial constraints. Other Black students enrolled in two-year universities would not go on to complete four-year degrees, and other students enrolled in four-year institutions would drop out owing to financial difficulties. According to a report by ThinkImpact, the college dropout rate for Black students was 14% (Bouchrika, 2022). The same report stated the college dropout rate for White students was 10% (Bouchrika, 2022). It is also worth noting that Black students face significant student loan debt, which can be a barrier to completing their degrees. A report by Best Colleges (2021) stated Black college students are more likely to take out loans and face barriers to repayment. Black students have less generational wealth and experience pay inequities after graduation.

Compared to other racial or ethnic groups, Black college students include the most significant percentage of women—nearly two-thirds are women. In addition, almost half are over

24, and the majority (62%) are considered independent for financial help (Post-secondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), 2010). This is the most significant subset of independent Black college students, with around two-thirds having dependents. Additionally, the most significant percentage of any racial or ethnic group—nearly two-thirds have single parents (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b; Tucker, 2021). This implies that a sizable portion of Black students entered college with the additional responsibility of being single parents with dependents. These duties may interfere with their pursuit of a college degree.

Loan forgiveness programs for Black students are vital to improving the student debt crisis (Best Colleges, 2021). According to the Brookings Institution, student debt cancellation can help reduce the wealth gap between Black and white Americans (Perry et al., 2023). The Biden administration announced a plan for student debt relief, including canceling up to $10,000 or $20,000 for Pell Grant recipients for individuals making less than $125,000 a year. However, according to Kyra Taylor, an attorney at the National Consumer Law Center, it is essential to note student debt cancellation should consider wealth inequality when creating a cancellation plan (The White House, 2022).

More than half of Black students are poor, as 65% are independent, implying they must have a balanced schedule to pursue their post-secondary education with full-time work and other family responsibilities. The UNCF found Black students borrow more, unlike their white counterparts, since Black families generally have lower incomes and assets, which limit their capacity to contribute to their education expenses (Bridges, 2018). One study found 36% of Black college students had no financial responsibility for their education. In other words, the government does not assume these students' families would have the financial means to pay for higher education since their income and resources are so low.

More than half of all Black students who attend community colleges get some financial

aid. The National Postsecondary Student Help Survey found, compared to 59% of all students,

74% of Black students received federal Title IV financial help during the 2017–18 academic

year. As opposed to 44% of all students, 63% of Black students were awarded a Pell grant (The

White House, 2022). Compared to 39% of all students, 54% of Black students obtained a federal

student loan. The average federal Title IV funding received by Black students was $9,967. The

average Pell Grant for Black students was $4,026 (The White House, 2022).

For Black students, the average federal student loan balance was $8,505. Half of all

Black students are independent students supporting families in community colleges. Lloyd et al.

(2021) found among independent students with dependents, Blacks were much more likely to be

single parents and to have a lower income profile than any other group. It is not unexpected that

Black students have a cheap cost of education, given they tend to attend low-cost colleges, get

subsidies, and enroll part-time. Additionally, 53% of Black students have annual tuition and fees

of less than $5,000. Only 7% must pay $12,500 yearly (National Center for Education Statistics,

2019b). Eighty-eight percent of Black students report using some combination of student loans

and earnings from part-time work throughout the school year to cover college costs. About 80%

of Black students have part-time jobs throughout the school year (National Center for Education

Statistics, 2019b), and one-third take out student loans each year. Most Black students value their

jobs highly. Nearly half of the Black students who are also working to pay for their education

(43%) classify themselves as primary workers who are also students (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2019b).

A third of Black students work between 16 and 35 hours per week, and almost 40% work

full-time (more than 35 hours per week; PNPI, 2019). While 11% of American Indians, 13% of

Whites, and 22% of Asian Americans work less than 15 hours per week, just 11% of Blacks do (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Students of African descent are more likely to take out student loans than students of any other racial or ethnic background. Williams (2019) reported one-third of Black students take out an annual average loan of $3,800. Overall, students' borrowing habits differ greatly depending on the sort of school they attend.

More than half of Black students at public and private four-year institutions take out loans, whereas just 11% do so at two-year institutions. As a result, Black graduates with a bachelor's degree have a disproportionately high amount of debt. Approximately $13,000 in average student loan debt is carried by Blacks who graduate with a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). However, over half of Black students who earn an associate degree have some student loan debt, even though most of these students do not take out loans. However, the average (which hides significant disparities) for how much money these students borrow is about $6,500 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). Many Black college graduates struggle to repay their substantial debt (Hess, 2021). In any given year, only about a quarter of Black college students will work and take out loans to cover their educational expenses. More than half of Black students hold down jobs and take out no student loans; practically all these students work more than part-time.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019b), only 8% of Black students opt for loans without working, indicating a preference for combining work and education. This preference may be due to various factors, such as the desire to avoid accumulating debt. On the other hand, dropping out of college can lead to financial challenges, as college graduates generally have access to better-paying job opportunities than those who have not completed their degrees (Bouchrika, 2022).

In the context of my study on barriers Black students face in accessing post-secondary education, the information provided sheds light on the intricate interplay between financial decisions, employment opportunities, and educational attainment. Specifically, it underscores how Black students' choices regarding loans and work can impact their overall educational experiences and outcomes. These data help us understand the economic dimensions of the barriers they face.

It is essential to consider how systemic racism and social prejudice can exacerbate these financial challenges. Discrimination in employment and educational opportunities can limit the potential for Black students to secure well-paying jobs, making it harder to afford higher education. This section delves deeper into the structural and societal factors that intersect with financial constraints, forming a comprehensive understanding of Black students' barriers.

Social Prejudice and Race

Black students have quite different perspectives on college (and on themselves). Black students' perspectives and reactions to being Black, the attitudes of white people toward them, and the stance and motives of the educational institution in its different interactions with Blacks span a wide range (SEHD Communications, 2020). Tendency to suggest that racial devaluation originates exclusively from the highly prejudiced sectors of our society rather than from the good people, terms like "prejudice" and "racism" frequently fail to capture the full spectrum of racial devaluation in our society (SEHD Communications, 2020).

Starting in elementary school and continuing through college, students in the United States are taught a hierarchical view of intelligence that reinforces racism. For instance, the bell curve suggests only a tiny fraction of the population has high I.Q.s (SEHD Communications, 2020). Teachers would not be inspired by this view to foster intellectual growth. Instead, it

promotes academic monitoring that institutionalizes a hierarchical view of intrinsic mental aptitude. This social system creates academic achievement for some and poor performance for others, and these hierarchical concepts of intellectual ability have led to an emphasis on pupils' individual and cultural traits. Consequently, several institutional norms and procedures at universities impede the intellectual growth of Black students (Monroe, 2022).

Silverman et al. (2021) researched the potential role educators may play in addressing this paradox by expressing background-specific strengths and beliefs that instead recognize the value of the unique skills and perspectives students often gain as a factor of their lower-SES backgrounds. They all came from low-income backgrounds, the pupils. Nobody in their family had gone to college or a professional job. Alcoholism, abandonment, illegitimacy, transience, and near poverty best characterize their prior living situations (Silverman et al., 2021). They felt there was "what's the use?" in trying to do well in school and work to be rewarded with a better position in the future. The study's authors concluded that the students were striving to move up from a lower socioeconomic level to one more typical of the middle class and that, as a result, they had developed feelings of anxiety, bitterness, and cynicism against both themselves and the social groups to which they aspired (Silverman et al., 2021).

However, one Black college student's firsthand experience suggests the situation has mostly stayed the same in the intervening decade (Wallace & Bell, 1999). Although one student's experiences cannot be generalized to the entire population of Black college students, this is a first-person account describing the author's life as a Black student at a predominantly White university (PWI). In the late 1990s, one student expressed the experience of being Black in a predominantly white university (Wallace & Bell, 1999).

The literature notes the Black American community often does worse than Blacks from other countries. According to Demie (2022), it is remarkable that students who come from outside the United States and have to make substantial adjustments tend to excel academically compared to Black students residing there. African and Caribbean students enroll in college with a specific goal (Demie, 2022). The same source elaborated further that the Black Jews are recent immigrants, mainly from former British colonies in the Caribbean, who made their way to the United States to go into business. West Indian immigrants have a stronger motivation to achieve a middle-class economic status and are generally better prepared academically and socially to cope with the economic environment of white America (Demie, 2022). Blacks are a minority group against their will (Demie, 2022).

Gest (2020) classified the minority population in the United States into three categories. The first group consists of independent minorities, such as Jews and Mormons, who are underrepresented in the majority population but do not have significant and chronic issues in learning. Second, we have the immigration subgroups. These persons have come to the United States willingly, hoping to better their financial situations, expand their horizons, or gain more political freedom. These immigrants have challenges due to linguistic and cultural barriers but do not have a persistently higher dropout rate than native-born students. Third, there are caste-like or forced minorities. They are descendants of individuals transported to the United States as enslaved, conquered, or colonized. After that, minorities are given low-level jobs and are prevented from fully integrating into white culture. US Census Bureau (2023) stated this group includes Native Americans, Blacks, and Native Hawaiians. The research has helped me understand the disparities between different groups of Black students in the United States. It also

helped me understand how different minority populations are classified based on their experiences in the United States.

Impact of Race in Education Outcome

Drop Out and Retention

More than half of Black college students drop out for reasons unrelated to intelligence or upbringing, while only about 70% of white students do so; many Black students who earn a degree take longer than the traditional four years (Lawton, 2018). The issue is that they are undervalued in many ways, some of which are subtle and others which are not. Seventy percent of Black students who start at a four-year university eventually withdraw, compared to 45 percent of white students (Bouchrika, 2022b). Parsons (2016) argued minorities, especially Blacks and Hispanics, are overrepresented in low-achieving high schools that do not adequately prepare their students for the rigors of college study. Lower SAT scores of Black students are often cited in support of the under-preparation explanation; these scores can be as much as 200 points lower on average than those of other students on the same campus (Parsons, 2016). Since 1996, Black students' average SAT verbal scores have been around 100 points lower than white students, and their average SAT math scores have been approximately 100 points lower than white students, with tiny annual changes (Parsons, 2016). The achievement gap in test scores is sometimes used as a synonym for Black students' difficulties.

Venerable et al. (2022) noted Black students' ability levels are higher than the discrepancies would indicate. He claimed when SAT scores are averaged across groups, Blacks score lower than whites and Asians. He attributed this disparity to the fact that fewer Blacks than whites and Asians have achieved well. Factors beyond educational opportunities and experience likely contribute to the disparity in the percentage of Blacks who score exceptionally well.

Although almost all Black students in a particular school have tested abilities within the same range as those of other students on the campus, their test-score deficits are nonetheless interpreted as an indication of preparation (Venerable et al., 2022).

According to research by Venerable et al. (2022), standardized examinations are unreliable predictors of academic performance in higher education. Even though the SAT is widely considered to be among the most significant standardized tests available, its developers admitted it "measures only about 18 percent of the skills that influence first-year grades and even less of what influences subsequent grades, graduation rates, and professional success" (Venerable et al., 2022). Of course, the point of the issue is whether or not the SAT is biased against minority groups, especially Blacks, due to the subject matter they assess, which may be outside of the experience of many minority students or for other reasons. The academic community is split down the middle, with proponents for both sides. Since there is currently no alternative tool that accounts for the unique cultural backgrounds of minority students, and since universities have grown accustomed to using the tests in their admission process, they are unlikely to change unless mandated by law. The continued use of these assessments is guaranteed. In addition, court action only appears possible now since academics have no consensus on whether the exams are prejudiced.

The American educational system has failed chiefly to help minorities catch up to their white counterparts in academic performance because of its exclusive focus on improving pupils' standardized test scores (American Psychological Association, 2012). However, students seen as culturally and intellectually weak are provided with fewer difficult educational chances and less support for their academic attempts because of their cultural peculiarities. The quality of professors' interactions with students during the learning process and their connections with

colleagues and members of the college community can be significantly impacted by the professors' beliefs and assumptions about their students, their interpretations of student behavior, and their responses to students' use of native languages.

Wikström and Wikström (2020) said accurately the college's goal is more complex than merely increasing the number of illustrious graduates by enrolling more bright undergrads. Higher education aims to transform students, aid their growth, and positively influence the world. Merit-based admissions proponents say treating applicants of various races differently would be unfair and discriminatory (Wikström & Wikström, 2020). Despite this evident truth, institutions have been ready to put other factors ahead of merit when making admissions decisions for a long time. Some schools have lower criteria for athletes and the children of alums, while others have more excellent standards for out-of-state candidates to public universities (Wikström & Wikström, 2020).

Student Integration

The student integration model proposes academic and social integration play a significant role in students' persistence and achievement in higher education (Davidson & Wilson, 2013). "Academic integration" refers to becoming an integral part of the collegiate learning community in and out of the classroom. Academic conversations with professors, T.A.s, and other students are included. The term "social integration" refers to the process of being deeply rooted in the academic and extracurricular aspects of the collegiate community. Peer group contact, casual contact with teachers, and participation in organizations are all examples of social interactions (Davidson & Wilson, 2013). In Davidson and Wilson's (2013) opinion, academic integration is more crucial than social integration. Tinto's (1993, 1998) concept of student integration remains

a popular tool for academic study. More studies have focused on African-American students' educational and social experiences in higher education.

While just 35% of white college students choose to enroll in two-year institutions, 50% of Black college students do so. Twelve percent of Black college students are enrolled in trade schools or proprietary universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Even though 65% of American college students are white, just 40% of Black students enroll in four-year institutions. Two-fifths of Black students who enroll in four-year colleges choose non-public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). Only 31% of Black students register for the entire academic year, whereas 63% of white students do so, almost double the minority group's enrollment rate. More than half of Black students enroll in college temporarily or permanently (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b), while the rest attend full-time but for a shorter period.

Classroom Racism

Classroom racism can take many forms (Arneback & Jämte, 2021). Arneback and Jämte's (2021) list of classroom racism included: being judged as inferior or not sufficiently prepared for school work; being constantly criticized for kinds and methods of speech and writing; getting singled out for criticism, such as being repeatedly called upon by the teacher who knows the student will be unprepared; and feeling that papers or exams are downgraded for unrelated reasons, such as an instructor's bias against the student's race. The authors argued group projects whose participants are "supposed to be selected at random" are the worst since they disproportionately affect Black students (Arneback & Jämte, 2021). The Black students are often separated into smaller groups. Black students are often left out of social gatherings, as one Black student put it. They may have meetings and be unable to get in touch. They may not listen

to you sometimes. They might give you something simple like producing copies of the final report for everyone in the group. "Many Black students are socialized to believe their survival depends on the extent to which they aspire to enact witness through assimilation" (Adonis & Silinda, 2021, p. 8).

Studies revealed most Blacks (and most whites) find college contributing positively to their personal goals and ambitions, and they feel closer to the lives they want to eventually lead than before entering college (Harper & Harper, 2015). Hedegaard (2020) factor examined the significance of 39 distinct prospective college student difficulties by analyzing questionnaire answers from 12 expressly accepted Black students. More than half of the students in his sample found academics to be the most stressful, and he found students who encountered serious academic difficulties were more likely to attribute those difficulties to a lack of ability than to a lack of high school preparation or competition. However, these same Black students hesitated to seek university-provided remediation (Winerman, 2021). More recent research confirmed Black college students who have struggled academically still prefer to attribute their difficulties to a lack of talent rather than to inadequate high school preparation and intense competition. However, new generations of Black college students are more likely to seek academic support services (DeLaney et al., 2021).

Although some Black college students continue to struggle academically, Black students who attend the most selective schools in the country perform just as well in postgraduate programs and professional attainment as other students from those schools (Bowman et al., 2018). Authors employed complex statistical research to support their claim that affirmative action has helped more Black students get into college than it has hurt (Bowman et al., 2018). Still, the underperformance (overall) of Black students relative to whites is worrisome, and it

may change or hinder career development, particularly for Black students who do not attend the most elite colleges (Scholarworks & Doug, 2020).

Some writers are so extreme that they advocate breaking the law to succeed in school. For instance, Demie (2022), a radical educator and observer of Black culture, encouraged Black college students to cheat on examinations so that they might beat the system. If students are serious about passing tests, they should be prepared to cheat on an exam, he told the class. One of the most excellent strategies to increase your chances of passing an exam is to study for it with the intention of cheating (Demie, 2022)

According to Weatherton and Schussler (2021), Black students are being destroyed not by white supremacy but by their bad habits. Many Black students wait until the final week of the term to cram. Some people stay up all night before a test only to cram. They try to cram chapters and notes between lunch and bedtime. According to Weatherton and Schussler (2021), something must be wrong when Black students prefer the student union, gymnasium, cafeteria, or kicking it with friends in the dormitory more than the classroom. Students, both Black and white, may identify with this remark. However, these same authors strongly opposed enrolling in mostly white universities, arguing they harm Black students' development. Indeed, according to Weatherton and Schussler (2021), non-Black schools are designed to destroy Black people or commit them to white values. According to the authors, students have no choice but to enroll in a school where most students are of the same race. This information is vital in the context of Weatherton and Schussler's (2021) research on Black student success in higher education:

1. Study Habits and Procrastination: Weatherton and Schussler's observation about Black students' procrastination and cramming highlights a potential concern. Understanding these habits is essential for their research because it may indicate a

need for improved time management and study skills among Black students. The authors might argue that addressing these habits can improve Black students' academic outcomes.

2. Preference for Social Activities: The authors' comment about Black students preferring social activities over the classroom is significant because it raises questions about their overall learning environment and engagement on college campuses. This preference might indicate a lack of motivation or a disconnect between Black students and their educational experiences. The authors may argue that creating a more inclusive and engaging classroom environment is crucial for Black student success.

3. Predominantly White Universities: Weatherton and Schussler's stance against enrolling in predominantly white universities is relevant to their research because it speaks to the issue of racial disparities in higher education. They may argue that attending schools with a more diverse student body or institution prioritizing diversity and inclusion is essential to supporting Black students' success and well-being. This perspective aligns with their research goal of understanding the factors that impact Black student success.

Moreover, Weatherton and Schussler's (2021) research centered on Black student success in higher education and the various factors that influence it. They highlighted study habits, social preferences, and the choice of educational institutions as critical factors. Their research aimed to shed light on these aspects to improve Black students' educational experiences and outcomes. This literature highlights that merit-based admissions proponents say treating applicants of various races differently would be unfair and discriminatory. Despite this evident truth, institutions have been ready to put other factors ahead of merit when making admissions

decisions for a long time. This information helped me understand the gaps in higher education policies and practices placed to center Blackness and confront anti-black racism.

The student integration model proposes academic and social integration significantly affect students' persistence and achievement in higher education. Academic integration refers to becoming an integral part of the collegiate learning community in and out of the classroom (Tinto, 1993). Academic conversations with professors, T.A.s, and other students are included. The term "social integration" refers to the process of being deeply rooted in the academic and extracurricular aspects of the collegiate community. Peer group contacts, casual contact with teachers, and participation in organizations are all examples of social integration. This information helped me understand how Black undergraduate students navigate challenges in higher education.

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature review in Chapter 2 identifies several potential gaps in the literature related to promoting post-secondary education and success for students of color. These gaps include the effectiveness of affirmative action policies, the impact of cultural differences on academic performance and support for minority students, the experiences of minority students at predominantly white institutions, the role of professors' beliefs and assumptions in shaping their interactions with students, the impact of intersectionality on academic experiences, and the impact of mentorship and support programs on academic success

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

While determining what to write in this chapter, I wanted to lay the foundation for my *why* of the dissertation, inquiry approach, methodology, and framework. Over these four years of graduate school, I heard Chapter 3, the methodology section, is your dissertation's most "important" section. It is the section where I, as the researcher, outline the dissertation's structure. Chapter 3 is considered "the nuts and bolts'' of the dissertation. While I find profound significance and a deep connection to Chapters 4 and 5, reflecting on my journey and narratives, I fully recognize and value the foundational importance of Chapter 3. This chapter, focusing on methodology, is crucial not only for its role in outlining the structure and integrity of the research but also for ensuring the study's replicability and rigor, which are essential in the scholarly examination and validation of any research project.

Chapter 3 is a "road map" for examining my journey and the barriers other Black students face, exploring the systemic impediments in a deeply personal and reflective manner. My narrative as a researcher highlights the reasons behind this inquiry, emphasizing the significance of such a study. Chapter 3 delves into identifying the impact of the perceived barriers faced by Black students in accessing secondary to post-secondary education.

This study explored the systemic issues and proposed strategies for overcoming them, drawing directly from my lived experiences. Towards the end of the chapter, ethical considerations, principles, and guidelines that govern the research process are outlined. The chapter also addresses the research limitations to acknowledge potential constraints or challenges faced during the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with a comprehensive summary encapsulating the chapter's essential components and insights.

Purpose of the Study

This autoethnographic study aimed to explore my P-16 educational experiences leading up to my post-secondary doctoral studies program.

Research Questions

1. What were some challenges I faced in my P16 experiences?

2. As a Black woman, what were some of the issues I experienced in coming into my post-secondary education?

3. In what ways did my family support my P-16 experience?

4. How did I overcome the challenges and barriers?

Research Design

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), qualitative research is a multifaceted method involving a naturalistic, interpretive approach to the discussion subject. The multifaceted nature of qualitative research allows a researcher to create an understanding of the research study question. Below are the principles designed by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) that underlie qualitative research:

1. It is holistic; Qualitative research focuses on the bigger picture and starts with understanding the whole.

2. It looks like a relationship in the system.

3. It is aimed at understanding a specified social setting.

4. It demands time-consuming analysis; qualitative research depends on ongoing data analysis.

5. It expects the researcher to be the research data collection instrument. Notably, it allows the researcher to give their biases and ideological preferences.

6. It incorporates informed consent decisions and is responsive to ethical considerations.

The objective of qualitative research is not explanatory but somewhat exploratory and descriptive (Ferreira et al., 1998). According to Meyer (2001), the exploratory nature of qualitative research allows the researcher to discuss the participants' experiences, which will either confront or sustain the theoretical molds the research is based on. Notably, its descriptive nature allows the readers or, rather, the audience to understand the attached meaning to the experience, the different nature of the problem, and the impact of the problem.

Qualitative research is particularly suited for investigating complex human experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, making it an ideal fit for understanding the unique viewpoints and challenges I encountered during my education continuum. The principles of qualitative research help strengthen the connection between the research design and goals. One of these principles is the emphasis on context and the in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Using qualitative methods, I explored the specific contexts and environments that shaped my learning experiences as a Black student. A qualitative research design allows for rich and nuanced data collection, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the various factors influencing their perspectives.

Secondly, qualitative research involves ongoing data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Given the complexity of the topic and the diverse range of data collection, the iterative nature of qualitative research allowed me to probe deeper into emerging themes and ensure no valuable insight was overlooked. Moreover, the decision to use a qualitative research approach for my dissertation was rooted in the principles of in-depth exploration and amplification of marginalized voices. These principles not only support the research goals of understanding the views of Black students in education but also enhance the credibility and

validity of my findings by allowing for a comprehensive exploration of their experiences and perspectives. In light of the research principles highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, this study aimed to understand the challenges and experiences of Black students in accessing post-secondary education within the context of the United States.

<div style="text-align:center">Significant Work and Researchers</div>

Autoethnography, evolving significantly since its inception, has been shaped by numerous vital figures and their influential works. Beyond Carolyn Ellis's (2004) *The Ethnographic I* and Art Bochner (2016) *Coming to Narrative*, their other works like Ellis's (1992, 2010, 2016) *Investigating Subjectivity*, *Final Negotiations*, *Revision*, and Bochner's (2016, 2017, 2020) various publications have been fundamental in developing autoethnography's conceptual and methodological frameworks. In the past, autoethnography was more narrowly defined as "insider ethnography." During this time, researchers like Walter Goldschmidt (1977) and David Hayano (1979) began emphasizing the value of including personal experiences in research, recognizing the role of the researcher's identity in ethnographic work. In the 1980s, the focus shifted towards the importance of culture and storytelling in research, with ethnographers like John Van Maanen (1988/2011) noting different ways of writing about culture, such as "realist tales" and "confessional tales." This period saw an increased interest in the researcher's role in social sciences and the inclusion of personal aspects in ethnographic practices. The 1990s marked a significant growth in autoethnography's popularity, with ethnographers aiming to use personal experience and reflexivity to examine cultural experiences. During this time, publisher series like Rowan & Littlefield's Ethnographic Alternatives and the various handbooks on qualitative research were published, providing greater insight into autoethnography's use and importance.

Today, autoethnography is recognized for its critical observation of an individual's lived experiences and for connecting those experiences to broader cultural, political, and social concepts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It uses a variety of forms, including short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. This rich history and the contributions of various scholars have made autoethnography a dynamic and evolving field, continuously adapting and expanding its methodologies and thematic focuses.

Parallel to these academic developments, my journey in navigating autoethnography has mirrored the field's evolution. I have encountered and overcome challenges that resonate with the broader themes and shifts in autoethnographic research. Initially, my struggles were akin to the earlier phases of autoethnography, where I grappled with balancing insider perspective with academic rigor, reflecting the challenges researchers like Goldschmidt (1977) and Hayano (1979) faced. As the field shifted towards storytelling and cultural narratives, I explored diverse narrative forms to convey my experiences and insights. This approach was influenced by the works of John van Maanen (1988/2011), embracing both realist and confessional tales to enrich my research. The emphasis in the 1990s on reflexivity and personal experience in understanding cultural phenomena significantly shaped my methodological approach, allowing me to use my narrative to examine broader social and cultural dynamics. My journey through the field of autoethnography has not only been shaped by these significant scholarly works but also by my unique challenges and experiences, which have provided me with a deeper understanding and application of autoethnographic methods. This personal exploration underscored the importance of individual experiences in contributing to the rich tapestry of autoethnographic research and its continuous evolution.

Research methodology is determined by the nature of research questions and the research topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, the methodological approach shifts from traditional interviews to introspective narratives in this autoethnographic dissertation. Autoethnography, as a qualitative research method, emphasizes the use of the researcher's own experiences and reflections as the primary data source (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach enables a deep, personal exploration of the subject matter, fostering a rich, nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study.

Positionality Statement

As a researcher and a Black student, I engaged in a reflective narrative, drawing upon my personal and professional experiences, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about all challenges and dynamics faced within the academic environment. This self-analysis examined my interactions, experiences, and the socio-cultural contexts shaping my educational journey. As a researcher, I also brought unique experiences and qualifications that influenced the research study. I examined my professional experiences in the admissions and enrollment office for over six years. Witnessing the systemic structures that continued to keep the Black students at a disadvantage, comparable to their other ethnic counterparts. Additionally, I served as the president of a non-profit organization that promotes individual independence and sustainability through education, technology, trade, and the arts. I also helped students navigate their academic struggles.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research that allows researchers to explore their personal experiences to understand broader cultural, social, and contextual phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). It integrates the researcher's subjectivity into the study, breaking down traditional walls between the researcher and the research.

Historical Lens

Autoethnography was first coined in the 1970s but gained prominence in the 1990s within anthropological and sociological realms (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Notable researchers include Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, and Tony Adams, whose work laid the foundation for autoethnography's methodological and theoretical rigor. Tessa Muncey (2010) has contributed substantially to autoethnography, especially with her book *Creating Autoethnographies*. This work introduced autoethnography, an in-depth autobiographical personal story exploring the writer's experiences. Muncey's work is notable since it is the first practical guide on this research methodology, including a thorough history and answering several critiques against it. Students studying social science at the graduate and higher undergraduate levels should find it appropriate. The book offered several case studies, exercises, and thorough examples, all organized to mimic the process of writing about experience. Muncey (2010) also highlighted the increased interest in narrative research due to social science research expanding its emphasis on human experiences and providing service users a voice. Muncey's viewpoint does improve the historical lens portion of a research study, particularly by emphasizing the development of autoethnography and its growing use in sociological and psychological fields. I used it as a springboard to discuss evocative autoethnography, showing how more narrative-based and personal research techniques have replaced conventional ones.

Why Autoethnography

At the outset, I was unfamiliar with the concept of ethnography. The principles and characteristics that form the foundation of ethnography were beyond my understanding. However, I became intrigued by using my voice to represent a group often marginalized and generalized as a collective failure. My interest deepened upon encountering the work of Ellis and

Bochner (2000). They described autoethnography as an autobiographical genre that intertwines various layers of consciousness, blending personal experiences with cultural contexts. This method involves a dynamic shift between examining social and cultural elements of personal experiences and introspecting a vulnerable self-navigating and sometimes challenging these cultural interpretations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

My engagement with autoethnography was reminiscent of listening to the rhythm lyrics of musician Jill Scott. It felt like a dance between external observations and internal reflections, free from external scrutiny and purely driven by personal relevance and heartfelt concerns. It was akin to basking in the sun, enjoying the freedom and independence of conducting research and advocating for change. This approach could spark a paradigm shift—a more profound transformation than change, akin to moving mountains.

Furthermore, autoethnography allows for critically examining systemic issues in education, blending personal and academic experiences. This method promotes active participation by insider researchers while adhering to scholarly standards (Adams & Herman, 2020) as a Black student who has faced racism and barriers in education. I can empathize with other Black students' similar experiences. However, I was mindful of potential biases in my research and was thus committed to adhering to established research protocols to ensure the reliability and validity of my findings.

My background, including experiences in university admissions and a non-profit organization and personal encounters with racism, uniquely positioned me to contribute valuable insights to this study. I was dedicated to minimizing biases and avoiding conflicts of interest with participants. Autoethnography is an invaluable tool for exploring complex societal issues, mainly through the lens of critical race theory. For Black students seeking academic equality, it provides

both a method and a voice. This academic approach elevates personal narratives, contributing to

broader discussions on educational equity and solidifying its importance in social justice

research. Lastly, autoethnography provides a powerful tool for understanding complex societal

issues, especially when viewed through the lens of critical race theory. For Black students

striving for academic equality, it offers a method and a voice. In addition, this framework

elevates the personal narrative and contributes to broader conversations about educational equity,

making autoethnography a vital tool for social justice research. Table 1 provides the different

types of autoethnography.

Table 1

Types of Autoethnography

Types	Description	References
21 Analytic Autoethnography	Focuses on analyzing personal experience within its broader social context.	(Anderson, 2006)
Evocative Autoethnography	Engages the reader emotionally and aims to produce a broader societal or cultural understanding.	(Ellis & Bochner, 2000)
Indigenous Autoethnography	Authored by members of indigenous communities and focuses on their cultural practices.	(Smith, 1999)

Evocative Autoethnography

Evocative autoethnography design allowed me to use my voice and provide an account of

my personal experiences and beliefs. Ellis and Bochner (2000) stated an evocative

autoethnography engages the reader emotionally and aims to produce a broader societal or

cultural understanding. This is similar to Anderson (2006), who described another type of autoethnography, analytic autoethnography, which focuses on analyzing personal experience within its broader social context. Evocative autoethnography connects with human nature instead of the analytics of the phenomena.

Methods

The research was conducted in various settings that shaped my academic journey. This included the rationale for family and friends' interviews. Interviewing my family members and friends offered insights into how my academic journey has intersected with and been influenced by my relationships and community. Combining personal narrative with interviews and environmental observation, this autoethnographic approach provided a deeply personal yet critically informed perspective on the Black student experience in education.

Respondent Selection

In this evocative autoethnography study, the focus shifted from a participant-based approach to an introspective exploration, with the researcher assuming the respondent's role. As Lyell (1998) noted, qualitative researchers often focus on small, richly informative samples. In this study, the richness of data stemmed from my own experiences as a Black student who has encountered barriers in education from social constructs created through the foundation of racism as the root cause and effect.

The study utilized an evocative autoethnographic method where I, the researcher, a Black student, explored or examined personal experiences and reflections. This approach allowed for an intimate examination of the systemic structures and barriers impacting Black students in education.

Data Collection

Approach to Sample Data Collection

According to Mouton and Marais (1991), three significant data collection categories fall within the qualitative research tradition: participant observation, interviews, and personal documents. In this study, I used a semi-structured interview approach, enabling an understanding of the problem from the participants' viewpoint under inquiry. This process included conducting an in-depth, introspective "interview" with myself. This involved writing reflective journals, recounting specific incidents, and analyzing these experiences in the context of broader societal and educational systems. I explored and articulated how systemic factors influenced individual experiences in the educational setting.

This methodology allowed me to explore personal experiences in a way that traditional interviews with other participants cannot. By positioning myself both as the researcher and the subject, I provided an authentic, in-depth account of the lived experiences of a Black student navigating the complexities of education. The trust and rapport typically sought in researcher-participant relationships are inherent in this approach, as the introspection eliminates barriers to openness and vulnerability. The resulting narrative offered insights into the personal impact of systemic structures and practices in education, contributing to a deeper understanding of these issues.

For an effective semi-structured interview, I adopted the purposive sampling strategy to select the participants for the interview. This technique is especially well-suited to the autoethnographic study. This strategy is founded on the idea that respondents should be chosen according to their capacity to provide rich, in-depth, and essential insights related to the research issue (Patton, 2002). This systematic approach fits well with autoethnography with in-depth, narrative emphasis. For example, to investigate the educational experiences in certain cultural or

social situations, people from different origins and demographics were chosen using purposive

sampling (Patton, 2002). These individuals were selected based on their capacity to provide a

variety of viewpoints that advance a thorough comprehension of the subject. This sampling

strategy adhered to accepted principles in qualitative research, particularly in investigations

where comprehensiveness and specificity are valued above generalizability (Creswell, 2019). It

recognizes the value of unique experiences and viewpoints in creating a meaningful story and

representative of the complexity of the subject matter. My dissertation attempted to create a

narrative grounded in the respondents' lived experiences using purposive sampling, providing

perceptive and nuanced viewpoints on the research subject.

Respondents were protected through my methods of gaining approval from the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) to contact the respondents and collect data through this

research study. After receiving approval from the IRB, I contacted each respondent to solicit

their reflections on my academic journey and their own. Each interview was scheduled for up to

90 minutes and recorded on Zoom, with only the respondent and researcher. All interviews were

confirmed with the written consent of the respondent. Each interview transcribed using the

virtual transcription feature (auto-transcription feature). I verbally informed each respondent that

additional interviews may be requested and if questions need clarification.

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a critical role in data collection and

interpretation (Creswell, 2019). Acknowledging the inherent subjectivity in this research type is

essential for understanding the researcher's motivations and perspectives (Creswell, 2019). My

influence on the research process was significant, especially in how participants constructed their

experiences (Creswell, 2019).

Data Storage

All collected digital or physical data were stored in an encrypted location to ensure security and integrity. Digital data were encrypted and stored on password-protected computers with the appropriate cybersecurity safeguards, such as automated necessary upgrades and limited user access. Physical data collections will be kept secure and destroyed two years after dissertation approval.

Duration of Data Storage and Destruction

Following this specified time frame, all digital data will be deleted entirely from devices and cloud storage following secure deletion methods to protect respondent anonymity. Physical data was shredded to ensure no record of the sensitive information remains.

Safeguarding Respondents' Identity

Several precautions were taken to ensure participants remain anonymous and private. Pseudonyms were used instead of real names, geographical locations, and educational institutions, which identifying characteristics were changed without affecting the integrity of the data, and rigorous reporting ensures that no information shared can be linked to specific respondents. This strategy ensured that participant names are protected throughout the study, which complied with Institutional Review Board (IRB) ethical guidelines. By adhering to the strictest guidelines for data security and ethical concerns, these methods guarantee that the research upholds the confidence and privacy of all study participants.

In my autoethnographic study, following the data collection approach outlined by Feldman (2003), I had a narrative interview with family, friends, and instructors complemented by personal reflections and journal entries. This method aligned well with Feldman's perspectives on the importance of narrative and personal experience in autoethnography (Feldman, 2003). Furthermore, the role of the (IRB) was crucial in the study, ensuring ethical

standards are maintained throughout the research process. My approach to obtaining IRB

approval, contacting respondents, conducting interviews via Zoom, and following up with

transcription underscored a commitment to ethical research practices. This methodological rigor

ensured each respondent's experience was valued and distinct, contributing to the richness of the

data?

Following all interview protocols, I sent each interview transcription to the respondent so

that they could review, sign, and return the transcribed document. Following the respondents'

approval, all necessary edits were applied to the transcribed data, including all subsequent

reflective thoughts from the respondents. Each participant was scheduled on different dates and

times. Using devices such as smartphones and computers for data collection, I seamlessly

gathered and recorded conversations, personal reflections, and interactions, ensuring a rich and

comprehensive data set. The digital nature of this data collection allowed for a more dynamic

and accessible analysis process, enabling me to revisit and reanalyze the data as my

understanding evolved.

Data Analysis

As a doctoral student researcher employing autoethnography, my data analysis approach

followed Ellis and Bochner's (2000) framework, which emphasizes the interaction of personal

experience with analytical rigor. In this study, coding emerged as an indispensable methodology,

facilitating the meticulous examination and organization of personal narratives. This included

reflections, journal entries, and interactions with participants, notably family and friends. The

application of coding provided a structured approach to distilling and categorizing these rich

qualitative data, thereby enhancing the depth and clarity of the research findings. This coding

process identified themes, categorized patterns, and highlighted recurring patterns pertinent to

my research questions. These questions revolved around understanding the dynamics of educational experiences within my context.

The analysis of these data was not a linear process but an iterative one, where the collected narratives were continually examined in light of my research questions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This iterative process allowed me to delve deeper into the nuances of my experiences and those of my family and friends, and instructors exploring how our stories intersect with broader societal and cultural narratives. By examining these narratives through the lens of my research questions, I aimed to uncover underlying patterns and themes that shed light on the complexities of racial identity and educational experiences. The involvement of family and friends enriched the data and provided diverse perspectives, adding depth and breadth to the analysis. This approach ensured the research was grounded in the lived experiences of real people, making it both relatable and insightful.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the data is essential to conduct a reliable research study. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argued the trustworthiness of data is tied directly to those who collect and analyze the data and their demonstrated competence. To further ensure the trustworthiness of data, as a researcher I refrained from using coercion or misleading information to influence the participants. It is also imperative to conduct the study with all participants in the same manner, following the interview structure, without deviating from it. The researcher should maintain a neutral stance throughout the interview and not make assumptions or opinions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Having a reliable recorder aided in preserving the trustworthiness of the interview, enabling the researcher to refer back to the interview. The study used methods such as member checking and triangulation to ensure the reliability of the findings.

As a researcher, I used data triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources, which included interviews, observations, and documents, to enhance the study's credibility. Collecting data from different sources makes the study's findings more reliable, increasing the data's trustworthiness. I ensured the trustworthiness of data by reducing the potential biases that could compromise data collection and manipulate the collected data. Following these guidelines ensured my research study's reliability and the data's trustworthiness.

Validity

In educational research, especially in methodologies such as autoethnography, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) emphasized the significance of authenticity and reflective introspection for establishing research validity. They contended a valid dissertation should extend beyond simple storytelling to include a critical and reflective examination of the researcher's experiences and beliefs. This aspect is particularly crucial in studies that apply critical race theory (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). In such research, the individual's experiences with race and identity are integral to shaping the narrative and the analysis. According to Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), the foundation validity of these studies lies in the researcher's capacity to engage with their narrative critically, recognize their biases and subjectivities, and thus offer a more profound and sincere investigation of the topic (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001).

Additionally, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) advocated for data triangulation to strengthen validity. For an autoethnographic dissertation, this process might include aligning the researcher's personal experiences with existing scholarly literature, theoretical frameworks, and possibly other qualitative data sources like interviews or focus groups (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Such an approach augments the narrative and places it in a broader academic and societal framework, enhancing the research's credibility and significance. Integrating critical race theory

into this framework further solidifies the study's validity by providing a systematic method for analyzing and interpreting personal experiences, thereby ensuring that the research substantially contributes to the discourse on race and education.

Ethical Considerations

The study's foundation comprises ethical concerns, guaranteeing the research methodology's legitimacy and integrity. Before participating in the research, respondents must be fully informed about its goals, procedures, and use of their data. This is known as informed consent. Data protection is essential for the anonymity of respondents. All interview materials—transcripts and audio recordings included—were safely kept, and only the researcher can access them, protecting them from theft or unwanted access. Furthermore, every interview started with a review of each permission form, allowing respondents to address any questions or concerns. This stage emphasized their autonomy throughout the study by restating their freedom to withdraw or refuse to answer questions.

Anonymity is strictly protected. I used pseudonyms instead of each respondent's name, and any identifying information was meticulously changed to avoid identification while maintaining the data's integrity. This strategy improved secrecy and privacy while reducing danger. The study's inherent possibility for disclosing sensitive information is also disclosed to respondents. These moral concerns were in line with norms seen in other ethnographic studies such as Méndez (2013). This dissertation's ethical framework reflects, for example, the importance placed on informed permission and data protection in investigations involving personal narratives and contacts with close companions. The study's ethical framework aimed to uphold and defend the respondents' rights while ensuring the research procedure was open, safe, and considerate. This method added trust and honesty, essential for studies that delve into private

and perhaps delicate subjects and were consistent with standard ethical guidelines for qualitative research.

Limitations

Although I asked interview questions to elicit honest replies from respondents, partial or erroneous responses are nevertheless possible. This risk may have an impact on the findings' reliability and validity. The study design involved performing follow-up interviews, cross-verifying respondent replies, and using triangulation techniques to lessen this restriction. Despite the inherent ambiguities in respondents-reported data, I used triangulation strategies to establish a profound grasp of the study issue and the trustworthiness of the data.

Summary of Methodology

Chapter 3 of the dissertation outlined the methodology for a qualitative research study. This chapter adopted an autoethnographic approach, emphasizing the importance of personal narratives in understanding my research on education experiences. The methodology was rooted in qualitative research principles, prioritizing in-depth exploration of respondent's experiences to grasp educational inequity's complexities better.

The study utilized coding techniques to analyze data systematically, ensuring a rigorous examination of the textual material. This included reflections, journal entries, and interviews with respondents who are key figures in the researcher's life, such as family and friends. The qualitative nature of this research allowed for a rich, nuanced understanding of the respondents' experiences and contributed to identifying solutions to the barriers in higher education.

In keeping with best practices in qualitative research, as established by Poth and Searle (2021), the study maintained a straightforward, focused research interview and respondent selection protocol for a diverse perspective of my P-16 education experiences. Data collection

methods were employed, including interviews and focus groups, to gather comprehensive information. Additionally, the research incorporated reflexivity, recognizing the influence of the researcher's background and biases on the study. Ethical considerations were paramount, with procedures in place for obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring their confidentiality and safety throughout the study.

Finally, Chapter 3 acknowledged potential challenges, such as limitations and less-than-forthcoming responses. It outlined strategies to mitigate these issues, including cross-checking responses and conducting follow-up interviews. In summary, this research methodology was comprehensive, ethically sound, and tailored to explore the intricate experiences of my P-16 education experience that will be valuable insights into the education field.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

In Chapter 4, my exploration deepened, offering a profound personal learning experience. I adopted autoethnography, a qualitative research methodology guided by the principles and illustrative chart Keles (2022) provided in an article about writing autoethnographic educational research. This approach structured my inquiry and enriched the analysis, allowing the personal narratives to resonate with broader cultural and social insights. Keles' (2022) framework supported the systematic and reflective engagement with the data, ensuring a rigorous and evocative auto-ethnographic study. The qualitative method allowed me to speak to my respondents and allow them to use their voices, guided by open-ended questions, as a guide and participate in a dialog with them. As the framework for the autoethnographic study, I became the inside researcher. In my mind, I did not quite understand how to approach this type of study. I changed from my original study to examining my motives, life, and journey. To that end, my study took on a different meaning, which, I will admit, became very personal.

During this journey, I had a dream. In my dream, the autoethnography was "alive!" I saw myself inside of a circle of people. It was vivid. I saw each gender, sexuality, race, and color, even those who were dressed, and assumed they represented a different social class. While in the circle, I was turning around, looking in amazement at all the people, and trying to figure out the significance of this dream or reality. I began to spin and twirl around and around. Surprisingly, I did not become dizzy or off balance. I felt myself moving! When I awakened, I remembered the dream, and it was revealed to me that each person outside the circle had my face. Each one of them was me. I was the researcher on the inside, and each person represented a part of my life.

Even tapping into the masculine side of my inner self. My ethnographic study was indeed my life, and it also gave me the foundation and solidified the reason for the study.

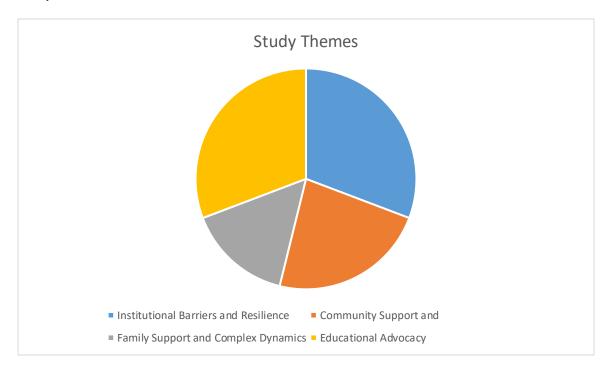Therefore, Chapters 4 and 5 have to be my most essential chapters because I am them, and dissecting and outlining my life also allows me to see my dream as I am the solution! Chapter 4 is not merely qualifying data; Chapter five is based on recommendations and is salient to creating a pathway toward educational equity. God allowed me to have a vision to pave the way before my thoughts were aligned. He allowed me to have professors and advisors guide and assist me in navigating the journey of discovery.

This chapter, enriched by the comprehensive interviews, provides profound insights that extended my understanding beyond the confines of this dissertation. The narratives and experiences shared by the participants illuminate family support and complex dynamics, systemic barriers and perseverance, the role of community and shared experience, and educational empowerment and advocacy, deepening my grasp of the complex landscape of educational equity. These revelations have informed my academic perspective and inspired a call to action, urging educational policymakers to reconsider and reformulate strategies to address the identified disparities in educational outcomes. Through this research, I now comprehend the critical role of personal and community narratives in shaping educational policies, which propels me to advocate for a more inclusive and empathetic approach to educational research and practice.

There are two parts to this chapter. In part one, I share the reflections of interviews completed with friends, family members, and some of my professors on my ongoing struggle translated into persistence in staying with and thereby beginning to understand the education system's failure. In part two, I share the themes from my interviews. These themes include

family support and dynamics, institutional barriers and perseverance, the role of community and shared experience, educational empowerment, and advocacy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Study Themes

Study Themes

- Institutional Barriers and Resilience
- Community Support and
- Family Support and Complex Dynamics
- Educational Advocacy

Interview Summaries

I interviewed five respondents: friends, family, and a professor. There were common threads among the respondents. In this section, I provide summaries of each respondent's interview. These summaries include my reflections on the interview and the data provided by the respondent.

Interview with Maya

Reflecting on the interview with Maya, a pseudonym for my daughter, it is evident that she perceived my academic journey through a unique and personal lens, being closely involved

as a family member. Her insights provided a profound understanding of my evolution as a

student and the nuanced interplay of familial support and challenges throughout my educational

pursuits. Maya characterized me as a student with three distinct attributes: dedicated, determined,

and stressed, emphasizing determination as the most significant trait. This determination, she

observed, has transformed over time from a quest for external validation to an essential drive

focused on achieving personal goals. This shift underscores my growth as an individual, where

the initial need to prove myself has matured into a pursuit driven by personal conviction and a

deeper understanding of my capabilities and desires.

Additionally, Maya's perspective was particularly revealing, as she viewed family more

as a challenge than a support system in my educational journey, suggesting the obstacles posed

by family dynamics contributed to my resilience and determination. She qualified the family

contribution as 80% challenge to 20% support ratio. She highlighted the complexity of familial

relationships in the context of academic achievement: "The minimal support that did exist was

crucial, yet the lack of understanding and expectations from family members often added stress

and devaluation to your experience."

Maya also touched on the broader context of my educational progression, from pursuing

an associate degree to achieving a doctoral-level degree. Her recollections emphasized a

transformation in my motivations and self-perception throughout these stages. My educational

pursuits were initially secondary to community engagement and breaking generational cycles.

However, there was a shift as I advanced in academia, from my undergraduate to my

postgraduate studies. I began to see education not just as a goal but also as an integral part of my

identity and purpose, increasingly aligning my academic achievements with personal milestones

and a clearer sense of self and as a resource for others. Maya's interview touched on research

questions one and three, and reflecting on this interview opened my eyes to discover that her opinion of the lack of family support was so high. I agreed with her statement that the support I received was crucial and essential. This interview with Maya reminded me of my entire higher education journey and the importance of completing it.

Interview with Rosa

The interview with Rosa lasted for 1 hour and 40 minutes. Rosa is a pseudonym for my sister. Rosa shared her perspective on my academic journey from Preschool to High School. Reflecting on this interview with Rosa, I was moved by the depth of personal insight and familial context she provided. Her narrative chronicled my educational journey at an early age and intertwined it with familial relationships, support, or lack thereof, and the personal challenges I faced. This reflection brought a sense of gratitude and recognition of the complexities and triumphs of my path.

Rosa's depiction of me as a student evolving from preschool through various educational and life stages resonated deeply. Rosa's account highlighted my perseverance and adaptability, underscoring a narrative of resilience that was both inspiring and humbling. Her detailed recounting of my journey from a young student to achieving higher education levels, despite numerous obstacles, reminded me of the strength and determination education demands and fosters.

This interview reminded me of the family's significant role in educational pursuits. While Rosa pointed out the support and encouragement from certain family members, she also candidly addressed the jealousy and lack of support from others. This duality in family dynamics reflects the broader complexities of human relationships and their varied impact on personal growth and achievement.

I agree with Rosa's emphasis on the critical roles of love, trust, and faith in my educational journey. Her perspective reinforced the idea that while academic success is often seen as a personal achievement, it is deeply rooted in a broader context of relational support, individual faith, and the encouragement of loved ones. The specific mention of my husband's support and the motivational role of my sister, Bettye Paul, highlighted the indispensable value of having champions in one's corner, particularly during challenging times. Furthermore, Rosa's longing for familial unity and her dream of gathering all siblings together for a meal is a poignant expression of the desire for reconciliation and togetherness. It speaks to the universal need for connection and the healing power of family bonds, even amidst past grievances or misunderstandings.

Interview with Bradley

Reflecting on the interview with Bradley, my professor, I am struck by the detailed account of my student life he provided, which shed light on my academic persona, leadership qualities, and engagement within the educational community. His observations mirrored my past endeavors and growth, inspiring a sense of accomplishment and a drive for continuous improvement. Bradley stated,

> You helped and spoke for others while teaching yourself. I didn't understand or know how you did all those things as a student and your nonprofit, too, at such a high level, and we miss that type of leadership and interaction to this day here at College ABC.

Bradley's recollection of me as a student emphasized leadership, resilience, and a deep-seated value for education, traits that resonate with my self-perception during my academic journey. Additionally, his description of my role as the President of the Black Student Union and my interaction with him in an educational setting highlighted a relationship built on mutual respect

and accountability. It reinforced the belief that education is a reciprocal process where students and educators are learners and contributors.

I was particularly moved by Bradley's appreciation of my efforts to engage with and uplift my peers, forming study groups, and serving as a tutor and coordinator. This feedback underlined the impact of collaborative learning and leadership that extends beyond individual achievement to elevate others' educational experiences. It echoed the notion that authentic leadership is about improving those around you, a principle I aimed to embody throughout my academic and professional life.

Regarding my academic growth, Bradley's reflections affirmed my commitment to education and the roles I embraced beyond the classroom. Balancing responsibilities as a Student Trustee, a leader in the Black Student Union, and my nonprofit endeavors highlighted intense personal and academic development. Bradley's acknowledgment of these efforts provided a reminder of the importance of engaging fully with the opportunities and challenges presented during one's educational journey.

Bradley's broader commentary on the changing demographics and challenges at College ABC, particularly concerning Black student enrollment and support, prompted me to reflect on the systemic and individual factors influencing educational equity. His insights served as a reminder of the ongoing struggles and the need for sustained efforts to improve educational access and success for marginalized communities.

Interview with Dexter

In the interview with Dexter, I learned about his perspective on my time as a student and my approach to learning and interacting during our childhood. Dexter described me as a leader and a motherly figure within our cohort. I was the one who brought everyone together and

ensured everyone felt included and cared for. My nurturing and inviting personality made me a protective presence, and I played a significant role in keeping the cohort united. Dexter also mentioned I was always ready to advocate for others when necessary, and my advocacy was appreciated because some were uncomfortable speaking up. "You were a leader and a motherly figure within our cohort. You tried to bring everyone together and made sure that they felt inclusion and cared."

Regarding my approach to learning, Dexter assumed I was an extrovert, always eager to engage in conversations, learn from others, and contribute my ideas. I was open to asking for help, valued my classmates' opinions, and actively participated in creating and adding knowledge. My approach to learning was characterized by inclusivity, engagement, and a strong desire to learn from and with others. Dexter highlighted I always talked to classmates for their opinions and help, engaging in conversations, starting, and adding to them. I agreed with Dexter. Like Bradley, I have always attempted to support students and those who do not have a "voice."

Interview with Malcolm

In the interview with Malcolm, he described my experience as a student as diligent, academic, and community-oriented. I actively participated in discussions about educational equity, particularly for Black people. Malcolm also mentioned a challenge I faced when one of my dissertation chairs had limited availability, causing delays in my academic progress. Additionally, there was a conflict regarding my research scope, which the chair did not fully understand. "People don't want students to know more than them." However, I eventually found a chair and co-chair who could relate to my topic. He pointed out that other Black students often face barriers and are pushed out of the university due to resistance and challenges. He

emphasized the importance of creating spaces for Black students' voices to be heard and ensuring they are not ignored or overlooked in these predominantly white institutions.

Self-Reflection

My educational journey has been a winding road filled with challenges and triumphs. I have always had a deep-seated desire to learn from a young age, even if I did not necessarily identify as a scholar. Growing up, I had limited access to books and resources, and my elementary school did not provide me with the academic foundation necessary to excel in higher education. However, I was always eager to help others and volunteered frequently in the classroom. Despite my eagerness to learn, I was also a target for bullying.

It was not until I attended College ABC that I began to find my footing academically. There, I gained the confidence to succeed and became a passionate advocate for education. However, my academic journey was not without its obstacles. As a Black student, I faced numerous challenges, including instructors who did not understand my background and accused me of plagiarism and inadequate writing.

Family support played a significant role in my educational experiences. My sister Bettye encouraged me to sign up for the Job Corps and earn my GED. She provided encyclopedias and urged me to look things up, even when it was difficult. My mother, before her passing, asked me to return to school and live my life to the fullest. Unfortunately, many of my supportive family members have passed away, leaving me with older siblings who are unable to offer the same level of support.

Journal Entries

- I am a bit stressed. I changed my dissertation topic and research. I am now completing an Autoethnographic study.

- I had a breakthrough today! I finally figured out how to use the library's online resources. It's amazing how much more accessible information is when you know where to look. I feel like I've finally found my footing in this program.

- I had a conversation with my Pastor today. He reminded me of why I started this journey in the first place—to make a difference. He encouraged me to keep pushing forward, even when things get tough. I needed that reminder.

- I had a meeting with my advisor today and it was a huge relief. We finally got everything sorted out and I feel like I can finally breathe again. It's funny how a little bit of clarity can make all the difference.

- I feel backwards today. I have to adjust my timeline. I don't see how I can complete my study, prior to graduation. I am stressed out!

- I had a moment of clarity today. I realized that my struggles aren't just about me, they're about all the Black students who come after me. I want to make a difference, not just for myself, but for all of us. I want to be a voice for those who don't have one.

Themes

Family Support and Complex Dynamics

The first theme from the interviews is the role of family support and its complex dynamics in shaping educational experiences. Rosa's reflections resonated deeply. She shed light on the significant support system provided by my family—specifically, my husband and sister, Bettye Paul. Their contributions extend beyond casual mentions; they occupy a central place in my life. Rosa stated, "This was not a casual mention of what they did; it was a concrete all-encompassing recognition of their vital place in your life, their emotional and logistical support having been constantly on the pedestal of your academic performance." This quote underscores

the crucial role of the family in my educational journey, which is marked by both support and complicated familial relationships.

Rosa's account also revealed the emotional role within family dynamics. She candidly acknowledged a dual feeling of support and jealousy. This complexity is a hallmark of family involvement in education. Rosa touched upon the duality of emotions within family dynamics. She noted all through the encounter that there existed a dual feeling of support and jealousy, an indication of the fact that there exist complex ways in which a chip of my achievements and difficulties were viewed in the family circle. This complexity reveals the layered nature of family involvement in your educational pursuit, where support is intermingled with other familial sentiments.

Research by Roksa and Kinsley (2018) emphasized family support is not always straightforward. It is a delicate balance—a tug-of-war between encouragement and other emotions. Jealousy, pride, and expectations coexist within familial circles, shaping how achievements and challenges are perceived. Notably, Brand and Xie (2010) highlighted the impact of emotional support on psychological well-being. When families provide a nurturing environment, students experience a sense of belonging and resilience. Emotional scaffolding becomes essential for academic success. According to a study by Groh (2017) on financial vs. emotional support, their analyses, based on a sample of 728 low-income college students, revealed intriguing patterns. While financial support does not universally correlate with academic outcomes, emotional support consistently fosters positive results. Groh (2017) echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that emotional connections within families significantly influence degree attainment.

According to Turner and West (2020), the family is not a monolithic force. It varies—across cultures, contexts, and individual relationships. Rosa's reflection of my nuanced support aligned with this complexity. Her acknowledgment that family involvement is not uniform—sometimes gentle encouragement, other times a push—mirrors Turner and West's (2020) findings. In addition, there are mixed emotions and motivation. Smith and Reeves (2020) delved into the emotional currents within families. Their research suggested intrafamilial relationships are dynamic. They sway between being sources of motivation and tension. The interview with Rosa reminded me of the support and jealousy that underscores this emotion going out and flowing back. It is not a linear path; it is a dance.

My pivotal figures are my husband, sister, mother, and family. Bettye Paul emerged as a pivotal figure—a beacon of resilience. Her role is not simplistic; it is layered. She embodied the delicate balance of familial support and individual agency. Campbell et al. (2021) explored how family relationships affect students' resilience. Family members play crucial roles even when filled with complexity—emotional highs and lows.

My journey teaches me that family involvement is not a one-size-fits-all prescription. It is personalized and context-dependent. Educational practitioners should consider emotional nuances—how feelings of support and jealousy coexist within families. Emotional scaffolding matters. Bettye Paul's unwavering support fortified my resilience. My autoethnography is not personal; instead, it is universal. It speaks to all of us navigating the intricate web of family ties.

Institutional Barriers and Resilience

Malcolm's poignant interview echoed the struggles faced within educational institutions. His words resonated: "Every step felt like a battle against a system that wasn't designed for us." This stark reality encapsulates the systemic challenges encountered, specifically barriers such as

institutional biases, limited access to quality education, socio-economic disparities, and cultural misunderstandings, often hindering progress. These obstacles to the educational advancement of underrepresented groups reflect a broader pattern of inequality that affects students from diverse backgrounds. Identifying and addressing these barriers can dismantle the systemic impediments to educational opportunities, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Despite these barriers, Malcolm's interview showed my resilience. My unwavering determination shines as a beacon of hope. In the face of institutional changes, I persisted—as a figure for others navigating similar paths. Malcolm's wisdom extended beyond mere tenacity. He spoke of "psychological armor"—a symbolic shield. This metaphorical armor, deemed essential for the psychological and emotional survival of individuals, serves as a protective barrier against the relentless onslaught of daily microaggressions and systemic dismissals. It symbolizes the resilience and coping strategies developed by those facing continual, subtle, and overt prejudice and discrimination. This armor shields them from the cumulative psychological toll of microaggressions, enabling them to maintain their integrity and sense of self in environments that may otherwise erode their well-being and sense of belonging. Williams (2019) underscored the impact of microaggressions—subtle, often unintentional acts that perpetuate bias. These accumulate, eroding resilience. My armor was forged in response to these deceptive blows. Masten (2001) reminded us that resilience is not static but adaptive. My psychological armor exemplifies this adaptability—a dynamic response to an unyielding environment.

In the thematic exploration of institutional barriers and resilience, insights from the interviews can be intricately tied to the existing literature that scrutinizes the systemic challenges within educational institutions and the resilience mechanisms employed by students. The narrative shared by Bradley, touching on the systemic and institutional challenges within

academia, aligns with the broader discourse on educational equity. Bradley's reflections highlighted the persistent hurdles faced by students in non-inclusive educational settings, resonating with the works of scholars like Ladson-Billings (1998), who discussed the educational debt accumulated due to systemic inequities. Martin's reflections resonated with the concept of educational debt. While the term "achievement gap" has been commonly used, it focuses on deficits rather than systemic injustices. In contrast, "education debt" acknowledges the historical and ongoing inequities that disproportionately affect Black students.

The Role of Community and Shared Experience

In the third thematic exploration, I delved into the significance of community and shared experience, as highlighted by Dexter, a former classmate and influential figure in my academic journey. Dexter's reflections offered deep insights into the sense of belonging and collective support underpinning my educational experience. Dexter's reflections resonated—a symphony of love, friendliness, and interconnectedness. His analogy encapsulated the essence of community: "By applying this analogy, I can share my love and friendliness and illustrate a particular aspect of how I see the relationships and the communities that are being built around me." I noted the role of community and shared experience. Dexter's metaphor mirrored the shared experiences that weave individuals into a cohesive fabric. In classrooms, corridors, and shared spaces, we find our kin—the ones who share our academic journey.

Moreover, the concept of emotional ties warrants closer examination. According to Adler and Kwon (2014), emotional bonds (manifested through friendliness, empathy, and love) play an essential role in fostering a deep sense of belonging. These emotions are fundamental, extending beyond the scope of simple interpersonal connections; they forge a collective pulse within communities, a communal heartbeat. This synergy of emotions within a group nurtures

individual well-being and cements a shared identity, enhancing solidarity and mutual support among its members. In the context of this research, such emotional ties are instrumental in building resilient and cohesive communities, underscoring the importance of nurturing these bonds to foster a unified and supportive environment.

My ethnographic study highlighted the transformative power of communal bonds, a critical element of which is collective wisdom. As Kurtz et al. (2024) highlighted, the collective wisdom within a community significantly surpasses the sum of individual insights. This pooling of collective knowledge and experiences enriches the individual learning journey and elevates the entire community's intellectual and emotional capacity. Additionally, the concept of resilience amid challenges, as explored by Bryk and Schneider (2002) in their study of Chicago schools, underscores the strength derived from community ties. They discovered robust community connections are a buffer against various adversities, reinforcing that shared experiences and mutual support are instrumental in building resilience. In this light, the communal bonds within educational environments are pivotal in fostering a resilient and collaborative culture, essential for overcoming challenges and enhancing collective growth and understanding.

Dexter highlighted the following aspects of community and shared experiences in the interviews. Dexter acknowledged the communal atmosphere within an academic setting. He emphasized the emotional support provided by this sense of belonging. This resonated with existing research that underscores the importance of a strong sense of community for student engagement and success. Dexter recognized the power of shared experiences. When students engage in collective activities, they create bonds and connections. These shared experiences contribute to a positive learning environment and foster a sense of identity and purpose.

Research has shown a robust sense of community significantly enhances student engagement. When students feel connected to their peers, faculty, and the institution, they are more likely to participate in academic activities actively (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Notably, Tinto's (1997) work emphasized that a sense of community contributes to student persistence. When students perceive themselves as part of a supportive community, they are more likely to persist in their studies and overcome challenges (Tinto, 1997).

Hurtado and Carter (1997) delved into the critical role of social integration in fostering educational persistence. Here, educational persistence refers to a student's sustained efforts and commitment to continue their education in the face of challenges. This concept was crucial in my study as it underscored the importance of supportive and integrated social environments in helping students maintain focus, motivation, and continuity in their educational journey. Hurtado and Carter's (1997) findings emphasized when students feel a sense of belonging and integration within their educational community, they are more likely to persist and succeed academically, highlighting the interplay between social factors and educational resilience.

Higher learning institutions should actively promote community by organizing collaborative events, peer mentoring programs, and inclusive spaces. Faculty and staff have a crucial role in fostering a supportive environment where students can share experiences and build bonds. In addition, counseling services, student clubs, and affinity groups contribute to community building. In addition, we should encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities that facilitate shared experiences. By recognizing the pivotal role of communal bonds and shared academic and social experiences, we can enhance educational journeys and outcomes for all students.

Educational Empowerment and Advocacy

Bradley's perspective sheds light on my journey—an odyssey of empowerment and advocacy. His words resonate: "Your persistence in overcoming educational barriers not only for yourself but also for others is a testament to your leadership." This shows leadership in action. Bradley recognized my tenacity as more than personal grit. Its leadership—an unwavering commitment to dismantling barriers. I did not merely navigate the system; I sought to transform it. Besides, it was beyond self. My approach transcended individual achievement, lifting others alongside myself. Bradley aptly described it as a "ripple effect of empowerment." My advocacy is not solitary; it resonates through the educational landscape.

Effect of Empowerment

My reflection, as illuminated by Bradley, unveils the transformative power of education, first, by empowering individuals. Gaventa (2006) reminded us that empowerment is not passive. It is about giving individuals agency—the tools to shape their destinies. My journey embodies this empowerment.

Advocacy as a Catalyst

Freire (1970) envisioned education as a catalyst for social change. My advocacy work aligns with this vision (Suzina & Tufte, 2020). By advocating for equitable access, I amplify voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

Systemic Inequalities

Education is not a solitary pursuit; it is a communal endeavor. Bradley's insights underscored this in terms of structural barriers. Anyon (1980) explored how educational structures perpetuate inequality. My advocacy challenges these structures, striving for a level playing field. There is also equity beyond the classroom. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized the

need for culturally relevant pedagogy. Bradley said my work included cultural responsiveness, representation, and justice beyond textbooks.

Remarkably, my journey is not confined to personal success. It is a beacon—a call to action. As I empower others, I alter the educational landscape brick by brick. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's words echo through time: "I have a dream. Your dream is not just yours; it is a shared vision—a world where education uplifts, empowers, and advocates for all." In examining the theme of overcoming personal and academic challenges, insights from respondents like Bradley, highlight the resilience and determination pivotal in navigating the educational landscape. This theme's resonance with existing literature underscores a broader academic discourse on overcoming adversity within educational contexts.

Research on educational resilience illuminates how individuals navigate and surmount personal and academic challenges, emphasizing the role of intrinsic motivation, support systems, and coping strategies. For instance, Masten et al. (1990) defined resilience as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances. This conceptualization aligns with Bradley's observations of proactive strategies and resilience in the face of institutional and personal challenges.

Further, the notion of "educational empowerment," as discussed by Bradley, echoes the sentiments in the literature that advocate for student agency and empowerment as crucial factors in educational success. Zimmerman (2000) highlighted self-efficacy and personal agency as critical components of student empowerment, suggesting that students who feel capable of effecting change in their educational circumstances are more likely to succeed.

Moreover, the literature on advocacy within educational settings, as mentioned by Bradley, pointed to the significance of advocating for systemic changes to address inequalities.

Freire's (1970) concept of "critical pedagogy" suggests education should be a critical reflection

and action tool, enabling students to challenge and transform oppressive structures. This aligns

with the theme's emphasis on navigating challenges and actively seeking to transform

educational environments for the better.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Everyone has a right to a quality education! Historically, Black students have been inhibited from gaining primary access to education. In the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall argued separate education is not equitable to all students, especially Black students (Klarman, 2004). More than half a century after the 1954 Brown decision, pursuing academic equality for Black students remains an ongoing challenge (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The findings of this study have made it clear that access to education is not a level playing field, with systemic and structural barriers creating a racially biased system that favors white students and disadvantages Black students and other students of color. Barriers that inhibit access to education for Black students are apparent, and in this study, I gained this conclusion through a qualitative autoethnography research design with a critical race theory lens (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Chapter 5 provides a discussion in four sections. The first section is the introduction and the summary of the findings. The second section connects the interpretation of the findings with the literature review. The third section highlights the implications and limitations of the study, and the last section includes recommendations for future research and the study's conclusion. This research aimed to gather and amplify the voice of Black students through their educational journey, from P-16, and to advocate for systemic equality in educational practices. In this study, I shared my personal experiences while incorporating the views of my research respondents to affirm my experiences.

Summary of the Findings

Data were collected through interviews with five respondents, who shared their experiences to support my story. By analyzing the interviews, trends and similarities emerged. Using the topics covered in Chapter 2, the literature review revealed several themes from the five interviews. These themes were analyzed and interpreted to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The topics in Chapter 2 include critical race theory, social prejudice and race, financial barriers, familial role in achievement and success, the lived experience of school and STEM classes, and selection processes. Key themes were pulled out from the data collection in each topic. The connection between the literature review and the data is highlighted in this section, and an overview follows each topic. This section reviews the data collected via interviews.

Family Support and Complex Dynamics

Family emotional support is significant for academic outcomes as it enhances psychological well-being and increases student engagement. Research indicated students who feel emotionally supported perform well academically (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Seeberg (2021) highlighted the importance of family background and collective experiences in motivating Black students. According to Seeberg (2021), Black students are motivated by their family backgrounds and collective experiences, which include pride in their family history, values, personal capacities, and proactive responses to systemic and individual racism. This motivation enhances their academic engagement. This topic is closely related to interview question three: In what ways did my family support my P-16 educational experience? This question allowed me to explore how family support can impact academic engagement and motivation.

Findings from this study noted two in five participants experienced the support family gave me through my academic journey. One participant, Maya, my daughter, viewed family more as a challenge than a support system in my educational journey, suggesting the obstacles posed by family dynamics contributed to my resilience and determination. She quantified the family contribution as 80% challenge to 20% support ratio. She highlighted the complexity of familial relationships in the context of academic achievement.

The support that did exist from my family members—such as occasional words of encouragement and help with household chores—was crucial in my academic journey, providing a sense of security and stability that allowed me to focus on my studies. The lack of understanding and high expectations from family members, who often compared my academic performance to their own and expected me to excel without providing the necessary resources or emotional support, added stress and devaluation to my experience, highlighting the importance of empathy and realistic expectations in supporting academic success. Black families contribute significantly to their children's perseverance and determination by nurturing cultural pride, enhancing self-belief, and actively challenging racism. Schools must recognize and collaborate with Black families to support the high achievement of Black students in K-12 education (Seeberg, 2021).

Systemic Barriers and Perseverance

Historically, though Black students and their families have tirelessly fought for equal access to education, systemic barriers persist (Owens, 2022). Enslaved African Americans faced a daily choice between learning and life. Despite the risk of whippings, beatings, and death, they gathered in dimly lit churches to teach themselves how to read. This covert form of learning empowered them to find strength in their pens and create their classrooms (Owens, 2022).

Today, educators continue to navigate attempts to withhold knowledge from minority students (Owens, 2022). Anti-critical race theory laws threaten teachers' licenses and livelihoods for merely discussing terms like "racism" or "slavery" in their classrooms (Elliott, 2020). This is a stark reminder of the ongoing struggle for academic freedom and the importance of critically examining the intersection of race, power, and education.

Anti-critical race theory laws are a recent phenomenon that has gained significant attention in education. These laws restrict teaching critical race theory (CRT) in schools, a theoretical framework examining the intersection of race, power, and education. Critical race theory is based on the idea that racism is a systemic issue that is deeply ingrained in society and that it is essential to address this issue in education. The anti-critical race theory laws are designed to prevent teachers from discussing topics such as racism, slavery, and systemic inequality in their classrooms. These laws are often presented as promoting "neutrality" in the classroom. Still, in reality, they are a form of censorship that seeks to silence marginalized voices and erase the experiences of marginalized communities (Kim, 2021).

The study respondents identified that though programs aimed at easing the transition of Black students to college are present, there is a disconnect between the program's intended goals and the perceived impact, highlighting the continued presence of inequality. The resilience and strength of Black students are highlighted through their strategic involvement in forming study groups or creating awareness. Black students challenge these systems, which are part of the challenges within the institution. Bradley's insights on the university's changing demographics and challenges, particularly concerning Black student enrollment and support, prompt me to reflect on the systemic and individual factors influencing educational equity. His insights serve

as a reminder of the ongoing struggles and the need for sustained efforts to improve academic access and success for marginalized communities. Bradley shared:

> As I look back on your journey, I'm reminded that the struggle for academic success is often a battle fought on multiple fronts. From navigating systemic barriers to confronting internalized biases, it's a testament to your resilience and determination that you've made it this far. Your story serves as a powerful reminder that we must continue to push for change, to create a more inclusive and supportive environment that allows all students to thrive.

Malcolm appreciated my attempt to become a doctoral student at Pacific and the opportunity to make an impact and advocate for change. Notably, he pointed out Black students often face barriers and are pushed out of the university due to resistance and challenges. He emphasized the importance of creating spaces for Black students' voices to be heard and ensuring they are not ignored or overlooked in these predominantly white institutions. "Resistance and challenges can manifest in many ways, such as microaggressions, implicit bias, and systemic racism," Malcolm said. "These experiences can lead to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and disengagement from academic pursuits."

As I reflect on my educational journey and the experiences of Black students, I am reminded of the importance of community-oriented education, where students are empowered to learn and grow in a supportive and inclusive environment that values their unique experiences and perspectives. As someone who has been educated and has a deep understanding of the complexities of educational equity, I believe it is essential to use my platform to amplify the voices of Black students and advocate for their rights.

My study highlights the unwavering dedication of Black communities to education despite the persistent obstacles they face. Educators must recognize the ongoing struggle for equitable education and work collectively towards a more just and inclusive system. I believe education is not just about individual achievement but about creating a more equitable society. As someone committed to giving back to the community, I believe education is a powerful tool for creating positive change.

The Role of Community and Shared Experience

Building strong connections with faculty members fosters a supportive environment. Faculty who recognize and appreciate the cultural experiences of Black students can provide personalized guidance and encouragement (Adams et al., 2021). Notably, school leaders and administrators play a pivotal role. Creating an inclusive atmosphere that centers on Black voices and acknowledges community and student assets contributes to student success. This study found the participants noticed a different role of the community in supporting Black students in their academic journey. Specifically, they highlighted the importance of community involvement in providing resources and support to Black students throughout their academic journey from P-16.

As a Black student, I can attest to the significance of community support in my academic journey. I remember the countless hours spent in libraries, studying with friends, and seeking guidance from mentors who looked like me. These experiences helped me navigate the academic landscape and instilled a sense of belonging and identity. The respondents in this study echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the importance of community involvement in supporting Black students. They noted that community members can play a vital role in providing emotional support, academic guidance, and access to resources to help Black students overcome systemic barriers and achieve academic success. Dexter highlighted the following aspects of community

and shared experiences in the interviews. Dexter acknowledged the communal atmosphere within an educational setting. He emphasized the emotional support provided by this sense of belonging:

> I appreciate your efforts to enroll students in higher education. We must do a better job in resources on attracting and retaining Black students at XY. We had the [A] program, which has now transitioned to the [B] program, and I forget what that stands for…I am hopeful, but some of the societal challenges that present themselves are in the way of our Black students, on top of regular life; trying to make it in college is hard …

This resonates with existing research that underscores the importance of a strong sense of community for student engagement and success. Dexter recognized the power of shared experiences. When students engage in collective activities, they create bonds and connections. These shared experiences contribute to a positive learning environment and foster a sense of identity and purpose. Further research challenges behaviorists to address systemic and anti-Black racism actively. It encourages identifying behaviors that contribute to dismantling racial inequities (Watson-Thompson et al., 2022). A narrative inquiry study explored Black student experiences in U.S. public schools (Brant-Rajahn, 2018). The author explored school racial climate, Black student identity, and culturally responsive interventions. In light of these, many education-focused organizations work tirelessly to help young people develop the mindsets and skills needed to combat systemic racism. Their efforts often go unnoticed but are vital in fostering a more equitable society (Winthrop, 2020).

Funding Challenges

The findings of this study underscore the significant funding challenges faced by educational institutions, particularly for new teacher hires. The lack of resources and support for

academic interventions can hinder the effectiveness of educational programs and exacerbate existing disparities. Research has shown that schools with high concentrations of Black students receive significantly less funding than schools with predominantly white student populations (Ladson-Billings, 2020). This disparity in funding perpetuates existing inequalities and hinders the ability of Black students to access quality education. Furthermore, the lack of representation among non-Black administrators in secondary education means that funding decisions are often made without the benefit of Black perspectives, leading to a perpetuation of systemic inequalities, as funding is often allocated to "minority" students, rather than specifically targeting the needs of Black students who face severe deficits in educational resources and opportunities.

Policy

The findings of this study highlight the need for policies that promote inclusivity and address systemic barriers. Specifically, policies that prioritize cultural competency training, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and anti-racism education are essential. Research has shown policies that prioritize DEI initiatives can lead to increased diversity and inclusion in educational institutions (Hurtado et al., 2020). However, existing policies in the United States often perpetuate systemic barriers, particularly for Black students. For instance, research has shown Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, while intended to improve education outcomes, has been criticized for its lack of focus on addressing systemic barriers and promoting equity (Ladson-Billings, 2020).

Conducting racial audits is a crucial step in addressing the systemic barriers faced by Black students. Racial audits can bring awareness to racial populations with an enrollment deficit, leading to the implementation of policies that address the specific needs of these populations. For instance, a study found racial audits can help identify and address systemic

barriers, such as limited access to resources and inadequate support services, leading to increased diversity and inclusion in educational institutions (Pendharkar, 2023). Furthermore, racial audits can also help identify biases in curriculum development and teaching practices, which can perpetuate systemic racism and inequality.

Providing racial incentives is another crucial step in promoting equity and inclusivity in educational institutions. Racial incentives can take the form of scholarships, mentorship programs, and cultural competency training for faculty and staff. For example, a study found institutions that implemented racial incentives saw an increase in diversity and inclusion among students and faculty, as well as improved academic outcomes and increased sense of belonging among Black students (US Department of Education, 2017).

To add, implementing anti-racism education programs for faculty and staff is also essential in addressing systemic racism and promoting inclusivity. Anti-racism education can help faculty and staff understand the experiences of Black students and better serve their needs. For instance, a study found anti-racism education programs can help reduce systemic racism and promote inclusivity in educational institutions by increasing faculty and staff awareness of the impact of systemic racism and promoting culturally responsive teaching practices (Singh, n.d.). Providing cultural competency training for faculty and staff is another crucial step in promoting equity and inclusivity. Cultural competency training can help faculty and staff better understand the needs of Black students and provide more effective support.

Also, implementing mentorship programs that pair Black students with Black mentors can also help promote equity and inclusivity. Mentorship programs can provide Black students with guidance and support, helping them to overcome systemic barriers and achieve their educational goals. For instance, a study found mentorship programs can help increase the

retention and graduation rates of Black students by providing them with role models and support networks (Smell & Newman, 2020).

Increasing scholarships, financial aid opportunities, financial aid workshops, and targeted financial assistance for Black students are crucial steps in promoting equity and inclusivity. Scholarships and targeted financial aid can help Black students overcome systemic barriers and achieve their educational goals. For example, a study found that scholarships and targeted financial aid can help increase the enrollment and retention rates of Black students by providing them with the financial support they need to pursue their educational goals (Reilly, 2023).

Finally, engaging with Black communities is essential in promoting equity and inclusivity in educational institutions. Community engagement can help educational institutions better understand the needs and concerns of Black communities and promote inclusivity and equity in educational institutions. For instance, a study found that community engagement can help increase the enrollment and retention and decrease the attrition rate of Black students by providing them with a sense of belonging and connection to the institution (Klevan 2021).

Funding Policies that Do Not Favor Black Students

In the United States, funding policies often favor white students over Black students. Research has shown schools with high concentrations of Black students receive significantly less funding for teacher training and development programs (Ladson-Billings, 2020). Across the country, districts with the most Black, Latino, and Native students receive substantially less state and local revenue—as much as $2,700 per student—than districts with the fewest students of color. In a district with 5,000 students, this translates to $13.5 million in missing resources. The funding disparities persist even when accounting for schools that serve more students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, or English learners (Ladson-Billings, 2020). For

instance, districts with the most students of color on average receive 16% less state and local

revenue than districts with the fewest students of color. Additionally, studies have shown

districts with high concentrations of Black and Latinx students face funding gaps, with an

average deficit of more than $5,000 per student compared to predominantly white districts

(Ladson-Billings, 2020). These disparities highlight the urgent need for fair resource allocation

to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2020). This lack

of funding perpetuates existing inequalities and hinders the ability of Black students to access

quality education. Furthermore, research has shown schools with high concentrations of Black

students are more likely to have underfunded schools, which can lead to a lack of resources,

including textbooks, technology, and facilities (Ladson-Billings, 2020).

Distribution of Funding

The distribution of funding is another significant challenge in the United States. Research

has shown funding is often distributed unevenly, with schools in affluent areas receiving more

funding than schools in low-income areas (Hurtado et al., 2020). This perpetuates existing

inequalities and hinders the ability of Black students to access quality education, resulting in a

lack of opportunities for academic success. Research has consistently shown schools with high

concentrations of Black students are more likely to face significant resource deficiencies,

including a lack of textbooks, outdated technology, and inadequate facilities (Ladson-Billings,

2020). For instance, a study found schools with predominantly Black student populations were

more likely to have outdated textbooks, with 64% of these schools having textbooks that were

more than five years old, compared to only 22% of schools with predominantly white student

populations (Ladson-Billings, 2020).

Furthermore, the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) funding formula, which allocates funding to schools based on student demographics, can exacerbate these inequalities by providing more funding to schools with predominantly white student populations (California Department of Education, 2020). This can lead to a significant disparity in the allocation of resources, with schools with predominantly Black student populations receiving fewer resources and opportunities, perpetuating the achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2020). This lack of resources and opportunities can have long-term consequences, including lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and limited access to higher education and career opportunities.

Policy Recommendations

In summary, there is the necessity for policies that prioritize inclusivity and address systemic barriers that hinder the academic success of Black students. Specifically, policies that emphasize cultural competency training, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and anti-racism education are crucial for creating a more equitable educational environment.

To address the systemic barriers faced by Black students, the following policies are imperative:

1. **Comprehensive Cultural Competency Training**: Provide regular cultural competency training for educators, policymakers, and administrators to promote understanding of the experiences of Black students, address systemic barriers, and foster a more inclusive educational environment.

2. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives**: Implement DEI initiatives that promote inclusivity, address systemic barriers, and provide resources and support for

Black students, including mentorship programs, academic support services, and extracurricular activities.

3. **Anti-Racism Education**: Incorporate anti-racism education into educational programs to promote understanding of the historical and contemporary impacts of racism, address systemic barriers, and foster a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

The policies outlined above connect to the themes of:

1. **Cultural Competency**: Cultural competency training is essential to promote understanding of the experiences of Black students, address systemic barriers, and foster a more inclusive educational environment.

2. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**: DEI initiatives promote inclusivity, address systemic barriers, and provide resources and support for Black students, leading to a more equitable educational environment.

3. **Anti-Racism Education**: Anti-racism education promotes understanding of the historical and contemporary impacts of racism, addresses systemic barriers, and fosters a more inclusive and equitable educational environment

Educational Empowerment and Advocacy

Empowering Black student success is a critical endeavor that requires concerted efforts from educators, advocates, and communities. Historically, Black students have faced challenges related to segregation, resource disparities, and lower expectations. Initiatives that empower Black students focus on smooth transitions into higher education, the labor market, homeownership, and middle-class benefits (Taysum & Ayanlaja, 2019). In the present study, all five respondents identified education empowerment and advocacy as a means to end the

systemic barriers. My advocacy work aligns with this vision. By advocating for equitable access, I amplify voices that might otherwise remain unheard. I also achieved this theme by addressing systemic inequalities. Education is not a solitary pursuit; it is a communal endeavor. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's insights underscore this in terms of structural barriers.

The 2022 "Black Minds Matter" report by the Education Trust–West examined the educational experiences of nearly one million Black youth in California, from preschool to college. The distressing disparities that persist at all levels of their academic journey are revealed through newly released state and national data. The results were that only 16% of Black four-year-old students are enrolled in transitional kindergarten classrooms. Black preschool educators are paid less than their peers, contributing to poverty among many of them (The Education Trust-West, 2022). The finding that Black preschool educators are paid less than their peers and are more likely to experience poverty is a critical issue that is connected to my research on the experiences and barriers faced by Black students in education.

The finding highlights the broader systemic issues that affect the educational experiences of Black students, including the lack of representation and support among educators. When Black educators are underpaid and undervalued, it can lead to burnout, turnover, and a lack of retention in the profession. This can have a ripple effect on the educational experiences of Black students, who may not have access to the same level of support and resources as their peers. Furthermore, the undervaluing of Black educators can perpetuate a lack of diversity and representation in the education system, which can further exacerbate the achievement gaps and disparities faced by Black students.

In my review of the literature, I found Black students face systemic barriers and biases that can affect their educational experiences and outcomes. The undervaluing of Black educators

is just one example of how these systemic issues can perpetuate inequality and disadvantage. The Education Trust-West (2022) report indicated despite the deep value Black families and communities place on education, structural racism, and institutional barriers continue to limit Black students' access to opportunities and support for educational success. This report serves as a wake-up call for local and state leaders, educators, and advocates. It underscores the urgent need to do much more to support California's Black students' educational pursuits (The Education Trust-West, 2022).

Implication of Practice

As I conclude this research, I am grateful to have shed light on Black students' silenced inequality in the educational system. This study underscores the need for sustained efforts to achieve equity in education. The illusion of inclusivity highlights the importance of moving beyond surface-level diversity and actively fostering an inclusive environment that values and empowers all individuals. Policies can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion, emphasizing the need for intentional strategies to promote equity.

In the context of P-16 education, this present research underscores the importance of acknowledging racial disparities, adapting therapeutic approaches, and actively combating racism to achieve genuine inclusion and equity for Black students and communities. By recognizing the historical and systemic barriers faced by Black students, educators, policymakers, and administrators can begin to address the persistent achievement gaps and disparities in educational outcomes. Reflecting on my own experiences in P-12 and higher education, I am reminded of the importance of intersectionality in understanding the complex needs of Black students. By acknowledging the intersections of race, class, and gender, we can begin to develop more effective strategies to support the academic success of Black students.

In terms of practical implications, educators, policymakers, and administrators must work together to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. This can be achieved by:

1. Implementing culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge the experiences and perspectives of Black students;

2. Providing targeted support services to address the unique needs of Black students, including mental health resources and academic support;

3. Fostering a sense of community and belonging among Black students through extracurricular activities and social events;

4. Encouraging student voice and agency through participatory research and decision-making processes.

By taking these steps, educators can address Black students' systemic inequalities and work toward a more equitable and inclusive education system.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative, autoethnography study aimed to explore my lived experiences as a Black student and the challenges I faced throughout my P-16 educational journey. However, the findings of this study highlight the extended systemic barriers Black students, in general encounter, making their educational journey more challenging than that of their white counterparts. This study is crucial for educational institutions, educators, school administrators, and Black students who are interested in advocating for equity in the education system.

The study challenges educators to collaborate with the necessary resources to ensure Black students have a place in the educational system. To achieve equity and eliminate barriers, it is recommended to create programs that support the Black community and build capacity by

empowering them to accept themselves and never feel inferior due to their race. Additionally, it is suggested to develop an education system that considers the diverse abilities and foundations of disadvantaged groups, such as low-income households, Black students, and other indigenous groups.

Future research should focus on disseminating the identified barriers to community groups, administrative and leadership teams, and school districts to increase awareness and drive systemic change. Additionally, future research could explore the importance of mandatory cultural competency training among enrollment staff, educators, policymakers, and students at both the post-secondary and P-16 levels.

Additionally, future research design and methodology could include a mixed-methods approach which would involve collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by Black students and the impact of cultural competency training. At the post-secondary level, a mixed-methods approach could involve collecting quantitative data through surveys or questionnaires to gather information on the frequency and prevalence of certain barriers or experiences. This would provide a broad overview of the issues faced by Black students. Qualitative data could be collected through in-depth interviews or focus groups to gather more detailed and nuanced information on the experiences and barriers faced by Black students. This would provide a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of the experiences and barriers faced by Black students.

Finally, I recommend policymakers submit racial enrollment audits to inform and suggest strategies for increased enrollment for Black students, similar to Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) strategies and pathways for other marginalized student populations. These

recommendations can ultimately improve, extend access, and change the trajectory of Black students' skills and lives for generations to come.

To further improve this research, it would be beneficial to expand the scope beyond California and explore the experiences and barriers faced by Black students nationwide. This could involve conducting interviews or focus groups with Black students from various regions to gather a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. In addition to exploring the experiences and barriers faced by Black students in post-secondary education, it would be valuable to examine the P-12 educational experiences as well. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the educational journey of Black students, from elementary school to higher education.

My Thoughts

Reflecting on the educational systems in place before I started my doctoral journey, I realize they were not designed for my success. The structures meant to facilitate learning instead acted as major obstacles for many of us from similar backgrounds and challenges. This dissertation was about my advancement and breaking down these barriers to promote educational equity. During my education from preschool to high school, I faced tough conditions in underfunded schools with inadequate resources. The teachers and administrators, who often seemed frustrated and disillusioned, perpetuated a culture of low expectations reminiscent of society's 'bootstrap' mentality, but without offering the necessary support. These unrealistic expectations still affect me and other Black students, to this day. The mental stress of thinking that it is your fault of being academically deficient, creates a mindset of inadequacy and allows the student to go through life from a low-self-worth perspective. Students are unaware of policies and structures that are implemented in creating institutional barriers. The Black student or its

ethnic counterparts are unaware of Title 1 funding allocations, which primarily is given to leverage the institution from underprivileged students, the academic gap of racial equity, the redistricting and division of neighborhoods, these are systems for the school districts to enforce equity, so that the student would only have to worry about how to become a better student.

These challenges are not unique to me. The struggles of academia, not knowing basic grammar rules, and math computations are shared by many students. These difficulties highlight the need for comprehensive educational support systems to ensure all students have the foundational skills necessary for academic success. These issues reflect the broader issue of educational inequity. Despite the support from learning centers and tutors during my doctoral studies, I still suffer with academic delays and have to use a thesaurus to meet academic standards, using words unfamiliar in my daily life that are also uncommon in my community.

Moreover, despite the barriers, and after accumulating $250,000 in student loans, enduring isolation and numerous sacrifices, I often questioned the value of my educational pursuits. These doubts persisted as I moved from an associate degree to my doctorate; after achieving my GED, securing a stable job, buying a house, and supporting my daughter's education at Spelman College, I never thought I would return to school. It was only a promise to my dying mother that pushed me back into education, a decision I now see was necessary for my growth, as well as the future of the Black student. To that end, each degree demanded significant personal sacrifices, including the loss of my family, home, and health—a stroke and COVID-19, and with these challenges, I still felt compelled to continue my education and finding solace and purpose.

This journey exposed me to new levels of understanding, technologies, systems, ideas, and how essential academic and life skills are for understanding social disparities to accepting

my disabilities and persevering through adversity. This education was not just about personal achievement; instead, it equipped me to contribute meaningfully to discussions on education equity, mentor peers, and lead me as an example of an effective practitioner and advocate. Furthermore, while reflecting on my entire journey from preschool to a doctorate education, I can affirm it was all worthwhile. I have had unique opportunities to grow, contribute, and help others. My experiences have also prepared me to continue advocating for educational equity for people who share my background and struggles. I aim to be a part of the solution.

My faith has been a cornerstone, affirming this path was God's plan for me. As the prophet Jeremiah said, God had a plan for me before I was born. This journey of self-discovery through my autoethnography was not just for academic fulfillment but to lead others in finding their paths. At the end of the process, we learn from one another, and together, we all will succeed!

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form for Autoethnographic Research

Benerd College of Education
RESEARCH SUBJECT'S CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO A DOCTORAL EDUCATION: AN
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Name of Lead Researcher: Gwendolyn Dailey
Name of Faculty Advisor: Charlane Starks, Ed.D.

You are invited to participate in a research study, which is entirely voluntary.
A. **Purpose of Research**. The purpose of this research is:
To explore my P- 16 educational experiences leading up to my post-secondary doctoral studies
program.

B. **Duration of Participation.** The expected duration of participation in this study will be
one hour, and time will be allowed for any follow-up questions or clarification within a
possible 30-day data collection cycle.

C. **Research Procedures.** There will be one semi-structured interview with a follow-up
interview or question as needed.

D. **Foreseeable Risks.** There are some minimal risks involved for participants. The
possible risks include emotional discomfort due to discussing personal experiences related to
racial inequalities or possible educational barriers. However, measures will be taken to ensure a
supportive and respectful environment during the interview process.

E. **Benefits.** There are some benefits to this research study, and in particular, the benefits
may include the following: This study will offer respondents a pathway to reflect on their
educational experiences, share their perspectives, and possibly begin a dialog to explore, if any,
racial barriers and disparities within the P-16 educational institutions.

I. **CONFIDENTIALITY**
The researcher will take reasonable steps to keep confidential information concerning this
research study confidential. Your identity will be kept confidential. In the dissertation,
pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. All data will be stored securely Upon
conclusion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked, or
otherwise secured location. They will be destroyed after three years after the research is
completed.

II. **PARTICIPATION**
You were selected as a possible participant in this study because:
- You are either a family member. With personal insight and experience of me
- Or you are my elementary teacher or a college professor of mine.
- Or you were a former classmate during my P-16 education

- Or you are/were a Black student attending a university

I expect to have up to nine respondents take part in this study.

Your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

III.   UNIVERSITY CONTACT INFORMATION

I am the lead researcher in this study, and I am a student at the University of the Pacific at Benard College of Education. This research study is part of my dissertation, in partial fulfillment of the degree of doctor of education requirements.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at (209) 271-1288 or by email at g_dailey@u.pacific.edu, or you may contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Charlane Starks at (916) 601-5037or cstarks@pacific.edu, or co-advisor, Dr. Jennifer Geiger at (209) 932-3612 or jgeiger@pacific.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a respondent in a research project or wish to speak with an independent contact, please contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, University of the Pacific, at (209) 946-3903 or by email at IRB@pacific.edu

IV.   [NO] COMPENSATION & [NO] COMMERCIAL PROFIT

There will not be any compensation or commercial profit to participate in the research study.

V.   ADDITIONAL COSTS TO SUBJECT

There will be no cost to participate in the study.

VI.   DISCLOSURE OF ANY CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The researcher has no stake or conflict of interest in the study. If there is any potential conflict of interest is because the researcher knows the respondents. There is no financial or academic gain or interest in completing the study.

VII.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND SIGNATURE

I hereby consent: (Indicate *Yes* or *No*)
- To be *audio/video* recorded during this study.
   ___Yes   ___No
- For such *audio/video* records resulting from this study to be used for? This is my Data Collection tool, to do the analysis and code for themes in my dissertation topic and discussion.
   ___Yes   ___No
- For my identity will not be disclosed instead. the researcher will use pseudonyms, written materials and presentations resulting from this study:
   ___Yes   ___No

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.
_____
Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been allowed to ask and have answered any questions that you may have, that your participation is completely voluntary, that you understand that you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Research Study Respondent (Print Name): _____

Researcher Who Obtained Consent: _____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

1. Childhood Friends

What was I like as a student?

How do you recall my approach to learning and interacting in our childhood years?

What other experiences would you like to add?

2. Professors

What was I like as a student?

How would you describe my academic growth, challenges, and engagement during my time in your class?

What other experiences would you like to express?

3. Pacific Students

What was I like as a student?

Describe any moments where you saw me navigating challenges specific to being a Black student at our university?

What other experiences would you like to express?

4. Family Members

How was I as a student?

From your point of view, what role do you believe family support played in shaping my educational experiences?

What other experiences would you like to express?